

MANHUNT



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"The Model Dies Naked"

by Harry Widmer

a
new
story
by

WILLIAM O'FARRELL

EVERY
STORY NEW!

Dick Shelton

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CARNIVAL CON

When "Zanda the Magnificent" and Ida, "The Girl with the Million Dollar Torso" joined forces, the wake of the "carny" was awash with trimmed suckers . . . while Ida and Zanda wallowed in the fleece.

BY DAVID ZINMAN



THE WOMAN shrugged her light shoulders, and they walked along the old harbor pier. He hoped she wouldn't force him to murder her. But sometimes you had to pay a high price for success. Success, that was something he had missed for a long time, he thought.

There was a sudden tug on his arm as Ida stumbled over the rough pier.

"Only a little ways to go sweetie," Zanda the Magnificent said as he braced her body.

He felt the impression of the soft skin of her back, and it made him feel sorry for what he was about to do. She was still a lovely piece of woman. He remembered he noticed her right away the first day when he was hired as a roustabout with the carnival. "The Girl with the Million Dollar Torso," the sign on the midway platform read. And

there she stood next to Baby Doll and Peaches, the three circling their hips before the crowd. He took note of Ida. The day would come when she could help him. Not anything permanent. But she would be right for getting started again. Because in her costume, the tanned flesh moved like ripples. The waist was narrow, the legs long, the hips tight. There was feeling in her eyes, too. It was not the blank stare of thousands of good lookers you pass on the street. She held you. She would make you turn your head. This one, plus his voice, would one day turn the heads of thousands.

So the days passed. And Zanda waited. He set up the tents and fed the elephants. And he didn't press. Waiting, biding his time. One morning, he went to repair Ida's trailer and met her. The next few nights, they had a beer after the last show. Each time, he took her back to her trailer and said good-night. Nothing else. One night, she asked if he'd like to go dancing. And she felt warm and soft against him in the car. He talked to her as they danced and he talked, softly and plaintively, driving back through the quiet night. He played it straight and she came to him—or so he thought.

His chance came in Marion County, Virginia. One night, the spicier came down with the DT's and couldn't go on. So they shoved a megaphone in his hands and

they pushed him on the girly show platform and stood back for the laughs. They never came.

Zanda threw away the megaphone. His great voice boomed over the midway like a cannon, reaching the farmers at the cotton candy machine, pulling the women out of the bingo, turning heads at the pinwheel, into the freak show, and the beef judging. It was a voice that was pure as music. After a while, you didn't even notice Zanda. It was just this voice coming out, sweet-talking, wonder-talking, honey-talking with a deep rich throb. It was enticing to the men. To the women, it said things a million sun-tanned farm wives dream of hearing a man say. Only standing there in the sawdust, it was as if he were carrying on a private conversation with each one of them. The tumbling words went spinning a web over their heads and they gathered round. In ten minutes, there was standing room only.

The next few months, he worked the geek show, the fire eater, the fat lady, the tattooed woman, the alligator man, the wolf boy and Mr. Tom Thumb.

The spring became summer, the peak of the carnival season, and then he opened his own concession—"Zanda the Magnificent." He offered Ida a fifty-fifty split. At first, she turned him down. A head act would only pay her a drop in the bucket to what she was getting. But the concession was only a part

of the deal, he said. And when he told her the rest, she said she'd agree to come with him. But on one condition. That he agree to a partnership, dissolvable only by mutual consent, and that they put that in writing.

Perhaps, at this point, Zanda should have begun to suspect his assistant was his match in shrewdness. But he had his mind on other things.

The next few weeks, he taught Ida everything he knew. He showed her how to mix with crowds, how to move her hands, how to shift attention to him on the platform, and, most important of all—how to touch as light as air.

Ida bought a satin cape and a skin tight silver lame gown that sunk low into her beautiful bosom and glittered in the blue lights. When the crowds came, she stood like a goddess on the platform and he, blindfolded, spun out the words:

"Hurry, hurry, hurry. Gather round Zanda the Magnificent, folks. Since the beginning of history, man has entered the world with his fate written in the book of life. God places communicators in the world through whom he tells the way on the highway of life.

Watch. My mind is like a book of blank pages in which He writes. Want to know if you're going to marry, young lady? Will you have success in that business deal, sir? Should you take the trip, ma-

dam? Gather round and look into the highway of life."

Ida walked into the crowd. She went over to the first bald head. He asked his question. "No, whisper," she said, and leaned over revealing to him, and him only, the sensuous, milk color of her breasts and the faint rim of pinkness beyond. Always, the most important thing was to make sure his attention was not on his valuables.

"Ah . . . ah . . ."

"Don't be afraid, just whisper in my ear, honey," she said. "Name and question."

"Willie Walker. Should ah sell mah house?"

"I get an impulse from a W. W. Is that right?" came Zanda's voice, as he heard the question on his tiny receiver.

"Yassah."

"Is that Willie? Is Willie the first name?"

"Thas right."

"Willie Walker."

"Yassah."

"And I see a home nearby here."

"Yassah."

"It has acres of tobacco. And you want to know should you sell this lovely home, this rich southside land. And the message I get, Willie, is no. No, Willie. Hold on to your God-given land and give it another try. But if the right price comes along, take it . . ."

Ida moved quickly during the exchange. All eyes were on Zanda, blindfolded, roaring forth on the

platform. Meanwhile, Ida's slender fingers, masked by her cape, were moving professionally to the pocket of the spellbound farmer. Brushing the left hip pocket, they slid inside. The fingers of the left hand pulled the cloth back slightly from the body so that nothing was felt. Then, the right hand's index finger and thumb slid down to the wallet, holding it until the victim leaned forward and left his billfold in her hand. The farmer swayed in fascination as Zanda's voice reached out to him as if from another world. There was his farm and his fate and his life in this voice.

Later, when he found his money gone, the victim's pride invariably tricked him. He was ashamed of admitting his losses. Even if he wanted to report it, he didn't know who robbed him. He didn't know when it was done and he couldn't identify anyone.

There were a thousand like him from Virginia to Louisiana and the purses of Zanda and his assistant bloated like sponges. But all this was a setup. The plan he hatched in prison was ripe, ready to unfold.

Zanda ploughed the money back into the business. He bought crystal balls, studied astrology, dabbled with Ouija boards, surveyed palms, and bumps on the head and mounds of feet. Then one day, he threw together his props and opened a fortune teller's tent. As he suspected, it went over even bigger than the

mental act. He knew he no longer had need of an assistant. His patrons were all women. Fat, cowed, lovesick middle-aged rich women, drawn by his looks and his voice. They savored the moment alone, his soft touch and velvet voice.

Florida would be the spot. There he could leave the carnival, set up his own shop and go after retired widows. Thousands of them. He would peg his newspaper ads at the desolate and disillusioned and lonely. He would use his own voice on radio and television in the late evening hours. The problem was to part company with Ida. Neatly and cleanly. It had to be that way because if it were done half-heartedly she would be blackmailing him in a year. Neatly and cleanly one way or the other.

"Well, it's about time," Ida said as they came to a gangplank of an old warship. It lay alongside a hundred others at this old pier, waiting for the scrap heap.

"Can you think of a nicer way to spend a Sunday morning?"

"Going to see a mothballed fleet?"

"Like sleeping warriors from a forgotten age. Look at them lined up one after another."

Seagulls circled the rusting ships that settled motionless and dead in the quiet harbor tide. Destroyers, cruisers, mine sweepers, amphibious ships tied up as far as the eye could see. Aging, creaking hulks of once-sleek warships that did battle

in the Pacific. They walked up the rotting prow of the cruiser Little Rock. The great dreadnought sat motionless. Her hatches, except for one Zanda had opened the night before, were dogged down and her portholes sealed. They walked the full length of the ship and Ida's white dress streamed in the wind from the harbor.

"So now we saw it," Ida said.

"Wanted to come out here with you for some time, baby," Zanda said.

"But not to show me an old ship, eh Zanda?" she said quietly.

The remark took him by surprise. The wind bristled on his back and disarranged his hair.

"What do you mean, baby?"

"Don't try that stuff on me. Let's get down to business."

"All right. But let's get out of the wind first."

They walked back across the deck and stepped through the one open hatch into a cabin. It was dark inside. The only light slanted in from the swinging door.

She turned and said point blank, "You're asking me out, Zanda. Aren't you?"

He blinked his eyes. Again, he was caught by surprise. "That's right," he answered, a little uncertainly.

"The answer's no."

"Why?"

"Why. After the chances I took on our pocket act? You ask me why when we get a chance to go

legitimate and really get into the big money."

The few seconds of exchanges gave Zanda time to think. And now he had his pitch ready.

"Baby, look at the situation. Rich old women coming in to me. Most of them come because they don't have a man anymore. Not for the reading. It boosts their morale is what it does. And as personal and close as I can get to each one, well, the more they're gonna want to keep coming. Now, if I have a cure doll like you with me, well you see what that's gonna do."

"You touch me. After we got this far with all the chances I took and I'm starting to wear decent clothes and a fur coat for the first time in my life, you want me to go back to burlesque and that crummy life. Well, you got another guess coming."

"Look, I don't want to do this, baby. You know I want you with me. You know I'm crazy about you. But if you stay, neither of us will get anywhere. We'll be right back on the sawdust in a month."

"No use, Zanda. You can't get rid of me. We signed a contract, Bud. I'm not like your audience."

"Why don't you go up to New York. I'll send you money every month and set you up in your own place. I'll fly up on weekends . . ."

"No thanks. I'm with you from here on like glue."

"Ida."

"I got nothing more to say."

"All right. All right. I've tried it the nice way. I can get rough too."

"Don't make me laugh, Mr. Talker. You'd have to murder me first."

CLANG-CLANG-CLANG-CLANG-CLANG.

The echo rang through the dead ship. It was an impulse. But it was the perfect psychological moment for him to slam the hatch shut. The darkness seeped around them and he lost sight of Ida. He waited for his vision to come back. When he seemed to make out a wisp of white, he said into the void:

"You picked the right word. Nobody saw you come in with me. And nobody comes aboard this hulk. There's an eight-inch stiletto strapped to my belt. It's razor sharp. You don't even feel it go in. Or I got a release in my pocket you can sign. Now which one do you want?"

There was no answer. Zanda peered into the blackness listening for her answer. It never came.

"Well, what do you say," he said.

Still no answer. He strained again for her form and it seemed like a white wisp moved from the opposite side of the room. Slowly, he walked toward it. It got smaller and smaller, then it seemed to separate and shrink into two forms, tiny white blotches. For several minutes, he stood still trying to puzzle it out. "Ida," he said tentatively. The forms were six feet away. Now four feet. Now two feet. He waited, then slowly put out

his hands and touched it. It was a shoe. Ida's shoe. And the form next to it was a second shoe.

"What the hell," he muttered. Across the stateroom, fluttering, he saw another white form. Was that Ida or was his vision going bad in the dark?

"Ida, I want you to sign that form. I want to break our partnership legally. Do you hear me?"

There was no answer. Zanda walked slowly to the bright form in the pitch dark. It moved.

"Last chance," he said. "Last chance."

He reached toward his belt as if he were pulling out his stiletto, hoping she would see his motion and relent. Then he raised his clenched empty hand as he moved closer toward her. The steel in his heel made sharp clicking sounds against the deck as he advanced. When he stood facing the bright form, he stopped and waited. It seemed to wave loosely, ominously, like a sheet on a clothesline. Suddenly, he lunged for it, his doubled fist smashing in towards its center as if he were delivering a knife thrust. He struck it, held it and pitched forward with it to the deck. Around his head draped a woman's dress as he went crashing head first into the bulkhead. He felt a dull pain around the crown of his head and the warmth of blood. He sat there for a moment listening for footsteps. There wouldn't be any. She had climbed out of her shoes.

She was taking off her clothes so her white dress and underthings wouldn't give her away in the dark. Why? She had no weapon to defend herself. There was no other exit than the one he had just closed and this was the only deck on the ship that was not sealed. She was a smart cookie. He would have to be cagey.

This was the last stateroom on the deck. Down the narrow passageway, ten tiny staterooms, once the quarters for Naval officers during World War II, branched off on either side. They were designed similarly. Each had two closets, a single or double decker bunk bed, a sink, and a porthole. She would be easy to find. He would go into each room and search it systematically.

"Ida, I'm giving you one last chance. Will you sign that paper?"

"All right. I'm coming for you now."

Zanda walked into the darkness like a blind man, feeling his way with his arms extended like a pair of insect antennae. In the first stateroom, he touched only empty air. But on the bed he found the stockings, slip and underthings. She was nude now, hoping that her tanned body would conceal her in the darkness. That must be the reason she did this. She couldn't have any plan of her own. But then she knew what he was going to ask before she came, didn't she. Maybe she was ready for this. Waiting for him

somewhere ahead in the dark.

He pulled out his stiletto and touched its edges, a little too briskly though because he felt the slick flow of blood from his fingers. Then he walked forward with the stiletto piercing the darkness until it rammed into the door of the second room. That wouldn't do. He had to play the same game she was playing. The sound of steel on steel would give him away. He put the knife back in his belt holster and took off his shoes. In the second stateroom, he inched slowly to the closet, reached inside, scraped the bulkheads, felt in the bunk, and covered every foot of its floor space. There was no one there.

In the passageway, he wanted to yell. But that would give his position away. So he kept quiet. There was nothing in the third stateroom and this time when he stepped into the passageway he could feel the perspiration blanket his body. If she had her clothes off, he would take his off too. Just keep on the belt holster and the knife. That would make them a match in the dark. Slowly he slipped off his shirt and pants and underthings until he too dissolved into the invisible darkness.

The fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh staterooms were empty too. In the passageway as he stealthily moved toward the end of the corridor, there was an indefinable presence. He told himself it was only the stillness of the old ship.

But a numbness started spreading through his spine. There was at the end of the corridor an alien pull. She was there waiting, he felt. Shadows divided before him as he walked slowly, his hands outstretched. And in the darkness he felt a host of unfamiliar qualities.

There was nothing in the eighth and ninth staterooms. But this time, in the ninth cabin, he waited. He went to the bunk and sat down and waited. If he were silent, perhaps he could hear her feet or her breathing, or if he were really quiet, maybe he could hear her heartbeat in the cabin next door. The darkness stared back at him. There were sounds, voices, sighs on the edge of silence. He felt his heart racing and his head throbbing. He stood up and rushed toward the tenth room. The door was shut. The only one that was. It creaked when he opened it. So now he was concealed no longer, he thought. She was a smart one. But he would be careful. He stood in the doorway for a full minute. There was no sound in the room. He walked slowly toward the bunk. His graceful fingers that years ago had explored the inside of a thousand pockets moved lightly over the mattress, then along the bulkheads and around to the closet. Its sheet metal doors were closed. It was the last place on the ship

she could be. He stood in front for a minute and then pulled them apart slowly.

"It's too late now, Ida. There's no turning back," he shrieked and reached for his stiletto.

They came almost simultaneously, the moment of discovery and the death thrust. It wasn't painful, as he had said. There was practically no feeling. The knife tip pierced the soft skin of the neck quickly, entered the jugular vein and penetrated the other side. It was a deft thrust. Zanda knew there would be a few spurting coughs of blood and then it would be over. The body fell back from the closet, staggered without direction in the darkened room and propped itself against the bulkhead. The body fought for breath. It tried to speak. The mouth opened in the awkward manner of a mute trying to shape a syllable. But there was only the wretched sound of gagging and then life started to ebb fast. The body slumped to the floor. It was in his last moment that Zanda thought how careless he was to have kept his stiletto holster uncovered. She had pulled it off so deftly that even he, Zanda the Magnificent, couldn't guess at what moment her fingers, the fingers he himself had trained, had taken his own knife from the holster.



IT SEEMED rather strange and chilling to him because he had never contracted for another man's death before. But it was something that had to be done and he could not do it himself because he wanted to remain clean. Direct involvement, if discovered, would destroy all that he had built these past few years. He might even lose Loretta and she meant too much to him to risk that. So he made a long distance call and entered into the contract.

"Mike? This is Burn. Remember me?"

"Burn?" Sargasso's voice over the phone sounded as coarse and

rasping as it had always been. "Oh, yes. It's been a long time. Four years, isn't that right?"

"About that."

"How's retirement?"

"Good. Never had it better. Until something came up."

"Oh? Is that why you're calling?"

"Yes. I was wondering if you couldn't refer someone to me, a— an engineer experienced in removing obstructions. It's a ticklish matter and I need a good man. You know of someone like that around?"

There was a short silence. Then

THE OLD PRO

BY H. A. DE ROSSO

He had been one of the best. But now he was retired, living the "good life". So he hired the job done.

from Sargasso's end of the line there came a soft, grating chuckle.

"Is something funny?" he asked with a touch of anger in his tone.

"In a way, yes," Sargasso said. "I mean, you of all people—" The chuckle sounded again.

He flushed in the privacy of the phone booth. "Well, do you have the man?" he asked testily.

"Sure, Burn, sure." Amusement still lingered in Sargasso's voice. "You were always the hasty one. Take it easy. When do you want the engineer?"

"This weekend. Sometime Saturday. At my place out at Walton Lake. I'll have the job all set up for him. Can you get him up here in that time?"

"Now, Burn, you know I always guarantee results." The humor still teased in Sargasso's tone. "Well, luck."

"Thanks, Mike. So long."

The line clicked dead at Sargasso's end before he had even started to hang up . . .

The name on his mailbox spelled Ralph Whitburn. He had a comfortable home here on the edge of the small town with a nice view of the curving river that was the boundary between Wisconsin and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Beyond the river stretched the vast, second-growth forest. He had fallen in love with the view the first time he had seen it. He enjoyed the cool green colors of summer and the tartan hues of autumn, he even en-

joyed the bleak look of winter with the trees standing dark and dead among the silent snow. It was so far removed from the squalor and stench of all the cities he had once known.

This was the good life. He could hear Loretta humming in the kitchen. The aroma of cooking was pleasant in his nostrils. He stood on the lawn and watched some swallows wheeling and darting not far overhead in their swift pursuit of summer insects. Yes, this was the good life and he was not going to let anything destroy it. That was why he had contracted for a man's death.

"Chow's ready, Ralph."

His eyes feasted on Loretta as he sat down at the table in the dining nook. She was tall and red-headed with a pert, saucy face spattered with freckles that also spread over her bare shoulders and arms. She was wearing halter and shorts that set off her good figure which was high-breasted, lean-hipped and long-legged. Once he had thought that love was an emotion he would never experience but that had been before he had met Loretta.

This was the good life, this was true contentment.

"Is something wrong, Ralph?"

He looked up with a start, surprised that he had revealed anything. Loretta was watching him with a half-frown, half-smile, green eyes clouded with puzzlement and concern.

His lips twisted into a smile that felt awkward and forced to him. "Why do you say that?"

"You look—preoccupied."

"Do I?" He laughed. "The approach of middle age when muscles grow flabby and the skin sags and—"

"Oh, stop it, Ralph. I'm serious." The frown was very pronounced on her forehead now. "Something's been eating you lately. What is it?"

He sobered and the great solemnness came over him again and the needling of a dark and futile anger. "It's nothing, Loretta. I swear it's nothing."

"Well, if this is how 'nothing' affects you, I'd hate to think how you'd be when something big and serious pops up."

"I've been thinking. You know, about expanding the plant. Wood products are selling very well. I've been trying to decide between enlarging the existing plant and building a new one, maybe over in Michigan."

She was staring at him in a strange, examining way. "Funny you never mentioned this to me before. Are you starting to keep things from me, Ralph?" She tried to say the last lightly but it did not quite come off. There had been a catch in her throat.

He got up and bent over her and kissed her cheek. "I'm just a little down. Kind of tired. A weekend at the lake will fix me up."

She hugged his arm and looked

up at him with shining eyes. "I was just going to suggest that. Why don't we go out there tonight? You can stay away from the plant tomorrow. It's Friday and the business will get along without you for one day. I'll start getting ready now."

She rose to her feet but he put a detaining hand on her arm. "Saturday's soon enough. And, Loretta, this weekend I'm going out there alone."

She gave him a long look. Then her mouth smiled but the eyes said she was just pretending. "You mean what the Hollywood people call a trial separation?"

"No, no," he said hurriedly, "nothing like that." He took her in his arms and held her very tightly, thinking that this was something he would never allow anyone to break up. "There's something I've got to thrash out alone. I wish I could explain to you, Loretta, but it's something I've got to do by myself. I'll miss you every minute I'm at the lake. Believe me."

"Ralph," she gasped, "I can't breathe." She leaned back in his relaxing arms and caressed his cheek while she smiled up at him. "Old and flabby?" she teased. "Another minute of that and I'd have had to go see a chiropractor."

"Then you don't mind my going alone?"

"Of course I mind, but I bow to your will, master." She kissed him fervently. "I'll miss you, too, you

big leg. Very, very much."

He buried his face in her hair. This was the good life, he thought. Nothing, no one was going to take it from him . . .

He had always liked the solemnity and quiet of the forest. There was something restful and soothing in the isolation, the lack of the sounds of machinery and motors, the absence of the hurry and bustle of the cities. The only intrusion from the outside world was the occasional snarl of an outboard motor out on the lake but even this was not overdone for he had selected a far end of Walton Lake on which to build his cottage. There were no immediate neighbors. He had come to these north woods for seclusion and here at the lake he had it.

He found the waiting hard to take and this was unusual for he had always been a patient man. The thing he disliked most about the waiting was that so many doubts and uncertainties were forming in his mind. He realized these were foolish fears for the man Sargasso sent would be efficient and capable. He knew how these killers operated. They entered a town or city as strangers, studied the habits of their quarry, decided on the best means of liquidation, did so and departed. They were the professionals who very seldom were apprehended and if they were never named their employers. He knew that very well but still he could not keep a feeling of anxiety from

creeping over him. There was too much at stake, he had too much to lose, that was the reason he worried so endlessly.

He tried fishing to while away the time. He got his boat and went out to the center of the lake by the island and on his third cast hooked a wall-eye. But his heart was not in it and he played the big fish carelessly and impatiently and lost it. He started the motor again, intending to cruise about the lake, and with his mind on other matters almost wrecked the craft on the treacherous rocks that lurked just beneath the surface of the water at the south end of the island. He swerved the boat barely in time and as he looked back over his shoulder at the place where he could have torn the bottom out of the craft the idea was born.

He could feel his heart begin to pound with an old excitement. Then he remembered that Sargasso was sending someone and that whoever it was he would have his own ideas. So Whitburn filed the thought away, somewhat regretfully, telling himself he could not become involved directly. He had to stay clean.

Heading back to the cottage, he saw the car parked beside his convertible. A strange tightness gathered in his throat, a sensation of uneasiness almost akin to panic, and he wondered at this for he had always prided himself on his iron nerve. He told himself to relax. The

matter would be in capable hands. No one was ever delegated by Sargasso unless he were thoroughly competent.

The stranger was standing on the small dock, watching the boat come in. He was on the short and chunky side. He wore a gay sport shirt and tan slacks. The head was round, the face chubby with small, hard eyes staring out of thick pouches. The graying hair was clipped short, giving him a Teutonic appearance.

"Burn?" he asked. The voice was soft, almost gentle.

"Whitburn. Been waiting long?"

"Maybe five minutes."

Whitburn tied the boat to the dock and stepped ashore. The other was watching him with a patent curiosity.

"I didn't catch your name," Whitburn said.

"Mace." There was a silence while the small, granitic eyes went on measuring Whitburn. "I understand you have a—an engineering problem."

"Come inside," Whitburn said. "I've got some cold beer."

This was rather unusual, Whitburn was thinking. It was a new experience for him, this outlining the matter and arranging a man's death. It had never been quite like this before.

"I don't know how to begin," Whitburn said.

Mace smiled thinly. It was an expression of patience as well as

amusement. "Take your time. Tell it any way you like."

Whitburn took a sip of beer. It seemed without taste, he found no pleasure in it, and told himself angrily to stop acting so damned childish. He had seen his share. Why should this appall him? And he told himself it was because he had never trusted anyone, only himself. That was his creed. To that he attributed survival and the good life he was now enjoying.

"There's a man—" he began and then had to pause, searching for words that were not there. Mace watched him, smile widening slightly, and Whitburn knew a touch of resentment. He remembered Sargasso's amusement over the phone. Was this the same? It couldn't be. Mace seemed to sense his thoughts and the small smile vanished. Mace took a deep swallow of beer.

"He'll be coming here this evening," Whitburn went on after a while. "After dark. Not exactly here but to the island. You noticed it, didn't you, the island? He comes there every Saturday night. I want this to be the last time."

"Blackmail?" Mace asked in his quiet voice.

Whitburn leaned forward in his chair, somewhat angered. "What did Mike tell you?"

"Mike? Oh, you mean— Nothing, Whitburn. You know how it is. He just acts as an agent. You know, like agents who book ac-

tors? He sends us where there's work for us. You know that."

"Why did you say blackmail?"

"You mentioned a man you don't want coming around any more. I've found it's almost always blackmail. Something else a guy can run to the cops. Blackmail, a guy has something to hide, he can't have the cops nosing around. Anyway, that's what I've found. Don't you agree?"

"You know the man?"

Mace spread his hands. "How would I? Brief me."

Whitburn could hear the leaden thumping of his heart. That sense of anxiety would not leave him. If he could only be sure that there would be no slip up. Mace looked competent. All of Sargasso's men were competent. Failure sealed their doom, there was no such thing as a second chance. But if something did go wrong and he was implicated, there would be small comfort in knowing that Mace would pay for his bungling. The good life would be gone, most likely lost forever.

"His name is Cullenbine, Earl Cullenbine," Whitburn said. In his ears his voice sounded dull and flat. "He used to be a police reporter with underworld connections. Blackmail had always been a sideline with him. The last couple of years he's been giving it his full time. He came up north last November to hunt deer and recognized me. At the time he didn't let on but

he came back this spring and hasn't let me alone since."

He looked down at his hands and saw that they were clenched tight. He forced them open and became aware that a trickle of sweat ran down each cheek. It was warm outside and some of the heat had penetrated into the cottage. Still he cursed silently and asked what had happened to his iron nerve?

He glanced at Mace and thought he caught the vanishing of a look of amusement on the man's face. But it could have been only imagination. He was as jumpy as a wino after a month long binge.

"You want it on the island?" Mace asked.

"That's as good a place as any. It'll be night and there shouldn't be anyone around. There's no one living on the island, not even a shack. During the day sometimes fishermen pass by there but very seldom at night."

"Fine," Mace said, nodding. "Fine."

"I don't want you to think I'm trying to tell you how to do your job but would it be possible somehow to make it look like an accident?"

Mace smiled the amused smile. "I imagine it could be arranged."

"I mean, without a weapon. That is, without something like a gun or a knife. It would be a dead giveaway otherwise. I don't want you to think I'm trying to tell you just what to do but I don't want to be

connected with it in any way. You see, I'm alone at this end of the lake. If a weapon is used, naturally I'll be questioned on whether I saw or heard something. Perhaps I might even come under suspicion. I don't want that."

He felt a little foolish talking like this. It was so strange for him to be the one saying these words.

"Relax," Mace said, the smile still on his face. "I'll fix it just the way you want it."

"I suppose I better describe Cullenbine to you."

"I've just thought of something better," Mace said. "Why don't you come to the island with me? You can make sure it's Cullenbine then. No chance for a mistake that way."

Whitburn was silent, unable to find anything to say. The feeling of anxiety was stronger than ever in him and he could not understand why it should be. Tension and suspense had never bothered him before.

Mace laughed softly. "If you're squeamish, I'll wait until you've left the island. After all, you do want to make sure it's Cullenbine and not someone else I might mistake, don't you? This way there's no chance for error. Like I said, I'll wait until after you've gone from the island. You won't have to watch anything."

Whitburn remained silent, thinking.

"You said you're the only one at this end of the lake. So who's to

see you going to the island with me? You do want to make sure it's Cullenbine, don't you? Chances are he'll be the only one to show up on the island tonight but you never can tell. I just thought, you worrying so much about something going wrong and all that, you'd want to be positive it's Cullenbine."

Whitburn sighed. "All right, Mace."

Mace glanced at his wristwatch. "What time do you expect him on the island?"

"About ten."

"Good. Is there a place I can catch some sleep here? . . ."

Frogs had their choral groups scattered along the shore of the lake and in the ponds in the nearby forest. Something flew past not far overhead on softly flapping wings. Stars glittered brightly. The surface of the lake looked black, like the underground river of the dead.

They got into the boat and Whitburn used an oar to push the craft away from the dock and into deeper water so that he could drop the outboard. The motor caught on the first try and he kept the throttle barely open, easing the boat toward the island with as little sound as he could manage.

"This how you make your pay-offs?" Mace asked. "On the island?"

"Every Saturday night."

"Didn't your wife ever get suspicious?"

"Sometimes I'd fish off shore in the afternoon and then cruise around to the other side where she couldn't see me go ashore. We had a place where I'd leave the money. Sometimes I'd come here at night, like now, and hand it to him in person. I'd vary it from time to time. Loretta never caught on."

Saying her name put a tightness in Whitburn's throat. For you, Loretta, he thought, I'm doing all this for you and the good life we have together. I'd never have got into this otherwise.

"Why didn't you ever take care of Cullenbine yourself?"

"I— That's not my line."

Mace laughed, a sound barely heard above the purr of the outboard.

The island loomed dark and brooding in the starlight. An owl hooted softly. Whitburn eased the boat in to shore, cutting the motor and letting the craft drift the last few yards. The prow grated gently against gravel and he stepped out into several inches of water and with Mace's help pulled the boat half-way up on the beach.

He stood for a few moments, staring out over the lake, wondering if anyone had seen him and Mace crossing to the island. Only the black water appeared. There were no sounds other than the gleeclubbing of the frogs and the soft lapping of the lake against the shore.

"He'll be on the other side of the

island," Whitburn said to Mace and started walking.

He led the way with Mace several steps behind him. They took a roundabout route, following the shore line for this was easier going than plunging through the timber that was choked with thick underbrush. Even so, Mace, who was more accustomed to walking the uncluttered and smooth cement and asphalt of the cities, stumbled a couple of times over the uneven earth and spongelike ground littered with debris that had been washed ashore. His curses were angry and vicious.

Mace was breathing hard by the time they reached the southern end of the island. Whitburn's breath, too, had quickened, from his exertions and a strange, uneasy excitement that he could not quite fathom. Mace caught up with Whitburn as he paused to study the darkness ahead. Finally Whitburn saw it, the faint, pink glow of a cigarette as the smoker inhaled on it.

He started ahead again, aware that Mace once more trailed him. He could understand Mace's difficult progress for he himself tripped and all but fell over a piece of driftwood. Then he made out the tall shadow standing there, watching them approach.

He should have known how it was when Cullenbine evinced no surprise that Whitburn was not alone. Cullenbine stood there quite

calmly, inhaling on his cigarette. The night concealed whatever expression there was on his lean, sallow face.

"I see you got here, Burn," Cullenbine said.

Whitburn felt his throat constrict. Something shrieked a warning in his brain but he realized that the alarm had come too late. Like an amateur he had let Mace stay behind him all the while. He turned and saw Mace standing a few feet away. Even in the darkness he could make out the black shape of the pistol in Mace's hand.

Cullenbine chuckled. "Have you finally got it, Burn?"

It was too late for recriminations and reproach. He had grown soft these past four years, he had lost that fine edge, that intuitive sense that had always served him well. He had lost all that and his life in the bargain.

Loretta, he thought, and for the first time since he had been a child he could have wept. Once more he said her name to himself and then put all his mind to what was at hand.

"I guess I read you just in the nick of time," Cullenbine was saying. "I didn't realize how fine I had drawn it until Mace told me that you had called Sargasso, too, but only after I'd done so. Mike has a sense of humor, don't you think, Burn? I mean, sending Mace up here to both of us?"

Whitburn became aware of the

calm, hard beat of his heart. This was more like it had once been. He was beginning to feel some of the coolness, the detachment he used to experience. Maybe it was coming back. Maybe he had not lost it after all.

"Who did Mike tell you to serve, Mace?" he asked.

He sensed Mace's shrug. "Mike said it was up to me. He told me to figure out if you'd gone soft, if there was nothing worth salvaging about you. I never knew you when you were one of Mike's boys, I was with another organization then, but he said you'd been his best. But then you got married and went in hiding up here in these woods. He said if you'd gone soft to take you and you are soft, Burn, like a cream-puff."

"I have the priority, Burn," Cullenbine put in. "After all, I called Sargasso first. You were a mite too late. I figured you were tired of paying me and were about to do something about it. But I thought you'd, do it personally. After all, I wouldn't have been the first man you'd have killed. But like Mace says, you went soft and called Sargasso, just after I did. I figured I wouldn't have a chance against a professional like you which is the reason I got in touch with Sargasso. Anything else you'd like to know?"

Whitburn stood there, silent. It was as though he were already hearing the earth thudding down upon his coffin.

"Good," Cullenbine said. "No sense in dragging it out, is there? Mace. Do me a favor. I'd rather not watch."

"You're the boss," Mace said. He motioned with the pistol. "Start moving, Burn. Back the way we come. I told you I was going to do it like you wanted it. An accident, you said? That's how it'll be."

He walked on wooden legs, hardly conscious of the pain when he barked his shin against a piece of driftwood. He walked like a beaten man, shoulders slumped, feet dragging. Mace stepped in close once and jabbed Whitburn hard in the back with the pistol.

"Faster, damn you," Mace snarled.

Whitburn's pace quickened then, after a while, began to slow and drag again. They were well away from Cullenbine now. Only the night was there, and the inanimateness of the island, and the frogs chorusing and the water lapping against the beach.

Whitburn had angled close to the edge of the water. He paused when he felt a stick of driftwood and stood with one heel poised against it. Mace's curse sounded softly and Whitburn sensed the man moving in to jab him again with the pistol. Whitburn kicked back with his heel, sending the piece of driftwood hard against Mace's shins. Mace swore as his feet tangled and tripped him. He fell heavily, cursing sharp and loud. The pistol

roared as he dropped but the bullet went wild.

Whitburn was on Mace instantly. A hard toe against Mace's wrist sent the pistol flying out of numbed fingers. They grappled, rolling into the water. With a fury he had never known, Whitburn got a hold on Mace, forcing him face down into the water. Whitburn's knees dug into the small of Mace's back, his hands never for an instant relaxed their iron grip.

Mace thrashed and kicked and tried to roll, he tried swiveling his head to get his mouth out of the water but it was just deep enough to thwart his efforts. Whitburn held him until Mace's movements weakened and finally slackened and were still. He stayed as he was on Mace until he was sure Mace would breathe no more.

He had never known rage and hate when killing until now. The realization came to him as he was walking back to Cullenbine. But then, Whitburn told himself, this was the first time he had ever been personally involved with his victims. All the others had been detached objects for whom he'd had no feelings. They had merely represented a job he had to do. They had never been a question of survival.

He had Mace's pistol in his hand as he came up to Cullenbine who was waiting, smoking calmly. It was not until Whitburn was almost on him that recognition, shock, then

then horror came to Cullenbine.

"Burn," he cried, voice harsh with surprise and terror.

Whitburn motioned with the pistol. "Start walking, Cullenbine. You're going to join Mace . . ."

He had the good life again, without the worry and fear of being exposed for what he had been. It was never better than it was now with Loretta. He bought her a Thunderbird for her birthday and in return she became more affectionate and satisfying than ever before. Yes, he had the good life again.

The deaths of Cullenbine and Mace had not created too much of a stir. They had been found drowned at the south end of the island, among the treacherous rocks. Cullenbine's boat had been found there, too, with the bottom smashed in where Whitburn had run it onto the rocks. The deaths were officially written off as accidental.

One day his phone rang and all the joy ran out of him and he was just a shell, hollow and empty, as he heard the coarse, rasping voice from the other end of the long distance line.

"Burn? Mike. How goes it?"

He had to run his tongue over his lips and swallow before he could speak. "All right," he managed.

"You handled yourself very well," Sargasso said. "They never tumbled, did they? Accidental drowning." Sargasso chuckled. "I

always said you were the best. That's why I hated to see you go into retirement. Didn't a taste of it make you hungry for more? You want to come back, Burn?"

"No, damn you, and listen to me. What was the big—"

"You listen to me, Burn," Sargasso snapped. "I just wanted to know if you still had it. If you couldn't handle Mace you weren't worth taking back."

"I'm not coming back. I—"

"Listen, Burn. Listen good. You got a wife, huh? Good looker, huh? She wouldn't be such a pretty sight after she'd caught acid in her face. Get what I mean, Burn?"

Something sickening formed in his stomach. He could see the good years begin to fade.

"There's something in Vegas," Sargasso went on when Whitburn didn't answer. "Something real touchy. It needs the best. That's you, Burn."

"No." He tried to shout it but it came out as a barely audible whisper. He was not sure whether Sargasso had heard it.

"Maybe you'd like to think it over," Sargasso was saying. "I can give you twenty-four hours. No more."

"All right," he said in a dull voice, "I'll think about it."

"Fine. See you, Burn." The line went dead at Sargasso's end.

He stood there with the receiver in his hand, staring with unseeing eyes at the view he had once en-

joyed so much. He could think it over but there was only one answer Sargasso would accept. And the Vegas thing would not be the last. There would be another and another and another until he even-

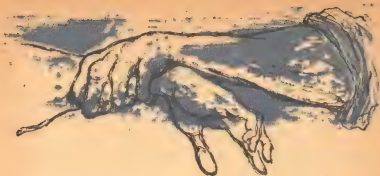
tually bungled and had to pay the penalty.

Finally he stirred and placed the phone back on its cradle. The sound that made was the requiem for the good life . . .



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DEAD HEAT

Skit had a reputation. He was real fast . . . with cars and with women. The combination killed him.

BY TOM PHILLIPS

THE COPS found Skit's heap at six the next morning. Or I should say they found the pieces. After the roll he took there weren't two bolts still connected anywhere on that iron. And of course Skit was stiff as ice, his body hanging, his eyes open, glazed in uncomprehending terror. But I mean deado—just the way I'd left him five hours before.

There was no sweat in identify-

ing the shreds. Skit Costello had been a real thorn to the local gendarmes. Even the state cops knew his heap on sight. I can imagine that they all breathed a collective sigh of relief when they saw who the mangled victim was.

Only one thing nagged the law boys. How had a driver as sharp as Skit lost control on the straight-away? Had the wreck occurred a

half mile on, where the hairpin turns began, it might have been understandable. But in the open? It just didn't figure.

Perhaps I should fill you in on terrain before I get ahead of myself. Coming out of Carson City you hit the local running onto the freeway. But as you hit the ramp for the freeway, State 301, which used to be the through route before the freeway was completed, cuts off to the west. Highway 301 is pretty much deserted nowadays. Only the farmers owning ranches along the stretch use it much.

While the freeway skirts the southern end of the mountains, 301 runs smack into them, crossing by use of switchbacks, sharp, narrow turns—real stiff driving, mostly upgrade. But for fifteen miles before you start climbing the road runs through desert, straight and flat, with only two or three easy curves, the kind you take at eighty and ninety with no strain. Perfect drag-strip material.

And that's what the hot iron crowd of Carson City uses 301 for. A race track. Sure, the troopers aren't *muy simpatico* about it, and every once in a while they lay a trap for us, but usually they bag only small fry. Operators like Skit and I know when the road's wide open. The farmers don't mind; their spreads are off the highway anyway. So it's only the state jocks we have to watch for. Otherwise it's a perfect drag-strip.

But once you pass the fifteen mile limit, things get rough. There's a quick ride up, and then the road turns to spaghetti, twisting and looping like crazy. Even before you get to "Panic Alley" the country changes, the shoulders fall away, and there's only rock pile, jagged and vicious, sixty and seventy feet down, on either side of the pavement.

The gang's usually content to scramble against each other on the straightaway, taking their heaps down when they hit the "alley". But once in awhile there's a grudge spin, and they'll barrel their cans into the mountain passes, pushing them as hard as they dare, until one of the guys chickens out. That's what happened to Skit and me. Only with one little variation.

Like I said, the local Tracys were up in the air about Skit. Of course there was nothing even hinted at in the newspapers, and the whole thing died a natural death. I was filling up at Christy's Service one morning, though, when Jorgenson, one of the state lardbottoms, rolled in. While he tanked up, I pumped him discreetly about Skit's death.

"Don't seem right to me, somehow," he said, squinting up against the already scorching sun. "Not with a hotshot driver like Skit. Drivers like him just don't go ramming off the road in a straight stretch, even if they're pushing a hundred. Barring tire trouble or something like that, I mean . . ."

"I don't follow you, Jorgy," I said. "What are you getting at?"

"This ain't for public consumption, understand, kid, but I think there was more to that smashup than accident . . ."

"You mean someone plowed Skit off the highway?"

Jorgenson's lip curled and he snorted. "Who'n hell do you know around here's man enough to try forcin' Skit off the road? He'd run the bastard over first . . ."

"Yeah, I guess that's right." Down deep I muttered a fervent *Amen*.

"I can't figure it, and neither can anybody else. The body was like hamburger, so we can't prove a damn thing, but get this . . ." Jorgenson paused for effect. ". . . That boy was pulled half out that front window, and his arm was like to torn off . . . You puzzle that one out . . ."

It was all I could do to fake an awed, mysterious expression. Underneath I was all but snickering out loud. I didn't have to puzzle it out—I *knew*.

I suppose you could blame it all on jealousy—say that I was envious of the iron Skit owned, that I was green over the know-how that creep had. *The things he could do with an automobile engine!*

All right, I'll admit it. That's what it was, pure and simple. Anyway, at first, when I could take it—before Maria got mixed up in it.

Okay. So high-school kids don't know from nothing. Snot-nose teenagers, juvenile delinquents, sex-crazy nogoodniks. Perhaps that's how you read the label. But listen, Buster. Corny as it may seem, we are human beings, we blister over our feelings, we sense things with an ache you blue-serge crumbs have forgotten ever existed.

And ho hum— It's the oldest story in the world, but still it's my story. I loved Maria. We had made all sorts plans to be married after we got out of school. We were plenty happy together. Anyway until Skit spooned in and messed up everything.

Maria Estrada her name was. A Mexican kid who lived over on West Twelfth. I met her during my junior year. She was beautiful, that's all I can say, beautiful. Those brown, deep eyes, nestled in a perfect, olive face, her hair, dark and lovely also, her lips, soft and full, were enough to put any man to the wall.

She was almost as tall as I was. Her body was already coming to blossom, her breasts were high, firm, symmetrical cones, giving her sweaters a life of their own. When she walked, she reminded you of a tiger stalking, her legs long and lithe, her small hips and buttocks working smoothly.

We went steady almost from the first. How I'd missed her all those years, I'll never know. Suddenly

she was there, and I knew she had to be my girl. I recall the spring of our junior year. The day was too damn pretty to waste on school, and we cut classes together, taking a long hike along the riverbank, heading for Garson's Woods, four miles out.

We walked hand in hand, stopping to rest, to take in the fresh warmth of the spring afternoon. I all but choked on the strange feeling that crowded my chest. Finally we stopped, and sat on a grassy knoll, surrounded by a sea of restless dandelions. Then we lay back and stared up, watching the clouds pass slowly overhead. Abruptly I came up on one elbow and leaned over Maria, kissing her hungrily.

I'd kissed her plenty of times before, and I'd told her I loved her, and she'd told me the same. But that time the kiss, the feeling was different. It was like we'd suddenly stepped into a new world.

"Maria," I murmured, rolling my lips against her smooth throat, "I . . . I love you . . ."

"Bart, I love you . . ."

And there, with our arms clenched convulsively around each other, we promised each other that someday we'd be man and wife—that nothing—no one—could ever separate us. What a yak that was.

But don't get me wrong. We didn't go messing around that afternoon in the woods. Why I'll never know. We were ripe for it, that's certain. There were other times,

when we were parked in my car along a road somewhere, that we got all worked up, and I lost control. "Wait, darling," she'd sob, fighting me, "wait . . . wait . . ." She won every time.

Not that I could really blame her for going over to Costello. There was a weird, unearthly fascination about the guy; almost any gal in school would have peeled down for him. I guess he symbolized wildness to girls who hadn't decided which side of life they wanted to live on. He was the cat with arrogant disregard for authority, for school, for teachers. He cared nothing for clothes, for the opinion of others.

The trashy type went for his heap in a big way; they loved the excitement of drag heats at midnight, risking their necks at a hundred-ten miles per, and then—what came afterwards. Skit tooled a '54 Merc with a stock mill, stroked, chromed to the gills, bored to put out 335 horses, duals, blowers—the works. He claimed she'd break 130. A real hot iron. I think if there was any one thing on earth he *really* loved, that machine was it.

He always gave the impression of being dirty-greasy, but that sure didn't fret the dolls none. He could fight clean or dirty, take your pick. It didn't matter which, he always came out on top. Not a brute—with the knobs on the arms—but he could handle himself. And the girls too.

Anyway that fall he moved in on Maria, and man, that was all. I nearly died the night she gave me the kiss-off. Even she didn't understand it. "I'm sorry, Bart," she said, fighting to keep from crying. "I can't help myself. I love him, that's all. I don't love you anymore . . ." Even as she tried explaining, I could see the frightened look in her eyes.

I was no good for anything for months afterward. Every time I saw Maria in the halls, I had to turn away, it tore me up so. Skit hadn't been good for her; she looked awful. Her eyes were dark rimmed, haunted. She'd aged years it seemed. Obviously Skit wasn't taking no for an answer.

Then several months later Maria didn't turn up at school for a few days. Later I found out she was in the hospital, sick. Three days later she was dead. Slowly the word got around the school. She'd got caught, and when Skit had dumped her, denying any responsibility for what had happened, she'd crawled off somewhere and swallowed iodine. Maria was beyond help when her mother found her. She never had a chance.

Stories got around. You know how that stuff is. How she'd called for Skit as she was dying, and such hokey material. But Skit wasn't anywhere around. In fact he never showed; not even at her funeral. I know, because I was there, along with some of her other chums.

If the tragedy hit Skit anywhere, he never let on. If anything, he was more loud, got kicked out of more classes than ever, he vengefully worked over every dog in school, he drove more guys into the ground with his hopped-up Merc. Maria's death was a burning pain I couldn't get over. Two weeks later the hate and bitterness erupted, and Skit and I had it out.

It was in the school parking lot during noon hour that it started. I was sitting in my rod taking the sun, waiting for the first bell, when Skit screeched into the open space beside me. I gave him a quick glance as he braked, feeling the anger begin to boil within me anew.

Skit must have seen the look and taken it at face value. When he got out of his heap he purposely slammed his door against the side of my car.

"Watch it, Costello!" I threatened. "Unless you want the side of that can of yours kicked in!"

He smirked and advanced on me. "You scare me, dad. Come out and try it. Or do you fight with your mouth too?"

I came over the top of that door swinging, my vision blurred with anger. Skit must've expected me to chicken out, because I landed four rocking blows to his face before he raised a hand. The fifth one put him down.

Deliberately I stalked to his iron and stomped a beautiful dent into

the front door panel. "You stinkin' bastard!" he growled, crawling to his feet. He came at me warily, his fists poised.

Afterwards the guys told me about it. There wasn't much about the fight that I clearly remembered. They said I was yelling like crazy, accusing him of killing Maria, calling him every unprintable name I could think of. But it was no contest. Skit set me up like I was meat on a block, and methodically hacked away at me. I still explore holes in my mouth where teeth once lived.

One thing I do recall though. Somewhere in that bloody melee, Skit's words got through to me and I heard him say, "Quit yammering about Maria, stupid! She isn't worth the sweat. She was a pig, that's all. Just a pig." He laughed gutterally, in animal spite. "Lots of fun, though, Bartie . . . Or didn't you get any?"

In that moment I saw Maria's face again, saw the fathomless depths of her brooding eyes, the panicky, helpless fear lurking there. She'd known what she was letting herself in for—that she was squandering her love on a slob. And now he stood before me, taunting me, calling Maria a pig—a lay. *That's all she'd meant to him.*

It seemed the top of my head exploded, and I charged Costello with new fury, battering at his ugly, sneering face with all my strength. He went down, banging his head

against his bumper. I don't know what happened when he got up. The guys told me it took two of the shop teachers to pull Skit off me.

But that wasn't the end of it. Now I knew I'd never rest until I'd squared things for Maria—and for myself. Even if it meant a stretch in the pen, I'd get Skit. And I firmly intended it would be a permanent thing, too. He didn't deserve to live.

I bided my time, and judging from the look Skit sent me every time our paths crossed, he was sure I was done, that I'd turned yellow. I was content to let him think that way, because I had an idea. Only it needed time.

A month passed and it was spring again. Remembering last spring, and the happiness Maria and I had shared, I knew it wouldn't be long now. I had to get Skit. And soon. It seemed the memory of Maria haunted me every waking moment, turning my sleep into nightmares.

A week later every detail was in place. I knew how I'd avenge Maria, I knew how I'd kill Skit. And besides, I'd come out smelling like a rose.

Charlie Kinzer was with me. He had his own personal axe to grind. Skit had cut him out with his girl, too. And like Maria, he'd got what he wanted from her, then bugged out. Only Betsy was lucky. She didn't catch fire. So I was sure I

could trust Charlie. He was wild to get Costello.

For the next four nights we haunted the main drag, the minor bars, watching for Skit, waiting for a time when we'd catch him alone. It wasn't the easiest thing in the world. He usually had a babe with him; or if it wasn't that, Hank Narges, another no-good, was along. But on the fifth night we got him cold.

It was almost one, and we were all for giving up, when we saw him hightail it out the main stem, heading for 301—alone. "Okay," I ordered Charlie, who was driving my iron, "get on him. And don't let him shake you!"

"Fat chance," Charlie snapped.

Main Street was locked tight for the night; nobody saw us trail Skit out of town. State 301 was the same, deserted. In the distance we saw the flashing lights of the freeway traffic. Hardly anything moving. Better and better.

My '49 Lincoln convert took backseat to only one car: Skit's Merc. Otherwise, there wasn't another car in the Carson City area could touch it. So I had no worries about catching Skit. It was keeping up with him for that vital moment, and getting away fast once the trap was sprung, that bothered me.

Skit had a cute trick he used on unsuspecting motorists, or on any hot-rod jock that wasn't on to him. He'd idle at fifty until the car behind attempted to pass. Then al-

most imperceptively, acting as if he didn't notice a car anywhere near, he'd rev up and stay abreast. Sometimes, angered, the driver would try to push past, but he was only banging his head. No heap could overtake that Merc, and they were always forced to drop back into line.

I was counting on Skit to pull the usual on me.

About one mile out, we made our move. Skit, seeing my lights, but not knowing who I was, went right into the see-saw bit. I was ready and waiting. "Cut out, Charlie," I said levelly, my pulse beginning to pound in my head, as I realized that this was it, this was the moment of vengeful glory I'd waited on for so long.

Seeing us pull out, Skit gently let out the horses, edging forward. "Tag him," I said. "Let him get cocky." Charlie did as he was told, holding it at sixty, then seventy, hanging back, so Skit wouldn't recognize us. "Make like you're quit-
tin'."

Charlie lost speed, and started turning into his lane. Skit cut his speed also, thinking we'd surrendered. "Okay, Charlie," I snarled. "Now! Give her hell!"

Charlie knew his role well. He should. We'd gone over every possibility of our plan countless times. He put the pedal down viciously, and the Lincoln surged suddenly forward, its engine whining shrilly. Skit accelerated, but we had that

slight jump on him. Eighty—ninety—Then we were alongside.

I leaned from my side, waving the white flag at Skit, seeing his eyes glow white in the combined brilliance of our lights, furtively darting from the road to my car. Then he saw who it was. A scornful smile crossed his face. He caught sight of the fluttering flag from the corner of his eye. Again the sneer. He gave me the thumb up. Pouring it on, he pulled away, hitting a hundred easy.

But just before he dragged off, I shouted at the top of my voice, "Run!"

"We lost him," Charlie said, his voice dead. He wouldn't buy it . . ."

"Don't kid yourself," I answered. "He'll bite. Just keep her at ninety. Stay out in the left lane."

I kept my arm over the door, feeling the wind burn and twist my flesh, feeling the white cloth snapping against my wrist painfully.

The flag was something new. The gang had only started with the gimmick a few weeks back. The object was to come alongside at ninety or better, cozing up close enough so the flag could be passed from the passenger of one car to the driver of the other. At ninety and a hundred per, the trick took guts aplenty. Most guys chickened out at the last minute.

I knew Skit. If there was anything under the sun he was vain

about it was his driving. I'd challenged him. No one could make him chicken out and live to tell about it. He'd be back.

Just as I thought, moments later I saw his tail lights flicker, saw him slacken speed. He was purposely allowing us to overtake him. Skit's left arm was outstretched, waving us on, ready for the flag.

"Ready, Charlie," I said, my voice ragged. "Here's the payoff . . ."

We came up at ninety-five to meet Skit coming back. Little by little, the roar of our engines dulling our senses, we pulled closer, back and forth, in and out, jockeying for position. Then we came up. I could see the confident smile frozen on Skit's lips. He'd be damned if he'd crap out to me.

We missed the first grab. "Steady, damn you, Charlie!" I muttered. "Steady!"

Again the space between our irons narrowed. I stretched for Skit's hand. "Easy, Charlie," I guided, "cut in a hair yet . . . There!"

I felt Skit's fingers claw into the cloth, I felt him yank it frantically. But I didn't let go. Instead I reached over with my left hand and clamped onto Skit's wrist. Then I dropped the cloth and grabbed with both hands.

Skit's face suddenly contorted in terror, as he realized he'd been suckered. "Let go, you dirty bastard!" he howled. "I'll ram your

side and we'll both go over . . . " For the merest fraction of a second the cars swerved in, then righted themselves. Still Skit didn't struggle to wrench himself loose. He knew he had to keep the Merc perfectly steady. That came first. If he lost control for a second—

"We're coming up on the alley . . ." Charlie gritted. I nodded, keeping my eyes on Skit's face, seeing drops of perspiration forming on his forehead.

Now I let loose with my right hand. One good heave and he'd come off the wheel—the Merc would go sailing. Only trouble was, there was a good chance we'd go with him. Skit, on a tightrope and knowing it, gave my hand a slight shake, testing my grip. I hung on.

Then I brought the handcuffs from my lap, the one link open, the other jammed shut, with a rope knotted through it. Deftly I slapped the open link on Costello's wrist, snapped it shut.

"*That's for Maria . . . !*" I shouted insanely, and played out rope fast. "Tear loose, Charlie!"

If I live to be a thousand, I'll never forget the stricken, panicked expression that crowded Skit's eyes, as he felt the hard steel clamp his wrist, as he realized this was it. The grimace was almost comical. The bracelet would hold. It wasn't a trinket; it was the real article. Charlie and I had tested the cuffs plenty.

It all happened too fast. I didn't have time to savor the sight of Skit fighting the rope, hysterically spinning the wheel with his right hand. I didn't have time to enjoy the pleading and fear that paralyzed his face, the same pleading and fear that was written on his death mask.

"Lay off, Bart!" Charlie shouted. "We're almost to the pass!" I leaned into the rope with all my strength. Behind me I saw Skit lurch forward, pulled halfway out of his window. Then I released the rope, and in that instant saw the Merc hurtle off the highway. I glanced at the speedometer. One-hundred even.

Over the roar of the Lincoln's engine I heard an explosion, muffled, Skit's rod hit the rocks. Next thing I knew, Charlie was braking. Then he executed a swift U-turn and we headed down.

The highway was still deserted. As we hit the place where Skit went over, I checked the pavement. Perfect. No skid marks. Only his. Grabbing my flashlight, I leaped over the door and went down, being careful to leave no footprints, jumping from craggy rock to craggy rock.

He was dead all right. What was left of the Merc was on one side, and Skit was hanging out, his left arm limp and mangled. His eyes were open, staring into space.

I jammed the key into the lock, and sprung the handcuff from Skit's wrist. An angry, shredded

gash was left. I let his arm fall, and rivulets of blood streamed down, hiding the wound.

Up on the road, I jumped into the Lincoln. "Dead as hell," I said tersely, coiling the rope, wrapping it in newspaper. Blood from the cuffs blotted and spread slowly.

"Good," Charlie said, forcing a

grin. He pulled away gradually, then pushed sixty all the way to the city.

Two miles along, I got the shakes. Suddenly I was trembling and chilled. Then I started to sob. Burying my face in my hands, I let it go. Charlie stared straight ahead.



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I COULDN'T feel the hammers in my head when I woke up. But I knew they were poised to thud into the base of my skull the moment I lifted my head from the pillow. My nose felt stuffed and swollen, as though someone were pinching the bridge tightly between thumb and forefinger.

I heard a noise in the kitchen. Something made of tin tipped over,

rolled for what seemed like an hour, then hit the floor with a sound like the cymbals in a Wagner overture. My head began to throb. I tried to deal with the noise passively, without moving: "Marian! Are you in the kitchen?"

The only answer was a metallic echo, the kind you get from an empty house. I forced an eye open and saw that the opposite bed was

HANGOVER



BY CHARLES RUNYON

He woke up from a four-day drunk painfully sober and calling for Marian. But the woman in bed beside him was not his wife. Then with mounting horror he reconstructed the events of the past four days.

empty. The spread lay neatly folded at the foot. The sheet was turned back as crisp and smooth as glass, ready to receive her body. But Marian hadn't slept there; she'd been gone for nearly two weeks.

I closed my eyes, and fragments of despair dropped like lead weights into my mind. I'd been thinking she came back last night. She smiled down at me the way she always did before coming to bed; with her eyes, hardly moving her lips. She was wearing the pale blue nightdress I'd given her two months ago on our tenth anniversary . . .

Hell, I must have dreamed it. I wanted her home, and that's the kind of impossible wish that keeps distilleries in business.

I felt a warm weight pressing against my back. I turned quickly, but it wasn't Marian. This girl's hair was the same dark auburn color; but Marian had never let her hair get into such a tangled mess, *with* matted rat's nests above the ears.

I drew away from her. She frowned in her sleep and moved toward me. I slid out of bed, pulled on my robe and looked down at her. She was somewhere between twenty and twenty-five. If she was pretty, I couldn't see it; not with her face lumpy and sagging in sleep. Her upper lip arched outward to reveal two slightly protruding teeth. A line of saliva

trailed from her mouth to the pillow, where it mixed with lipstick and formed a stain the color of diluted blood.

I hated to deal with her now; even the intimacy of conversation made my stomach queasy. But I wanted her out of my house, so I shook her shoulder.

"Baby . . ." Without opening her eyes, she rolled her tongue around her mouth. "Let's sleep a little longer, baby."

I could feel my patience slipping away. I hated that sticky, stupid, shopworn endearment; in thirty-five years I'd come to tolerate everything but being called "Baby." I shook her until her eyes popped open. "What's your name?"

"God, did you wake me up for *that*?" She jerked the sheet over her head. "Marian . . . you been calling me Marian."

I jerked the sheet off her head. "Dammit! That's my wife's name."

"I know, Baby, I know." She kicked off the sheet and stretched, her legs forming a straight line from toe to torso. "I'm Sandra. You can call me Sandy."

She gave me a heavy-lidded smile she probably meant to be sweet and seductive. To me it was like having syrup smeared on my face. Her nakedness aroused me somewhat less than a tree with the bark stripped off, though she had the fleshy, over-blown kind of figure that's supposed to be the American dream. She wasn't my dream

and that's why her presence threw me. I couldn't remember where I'd picked her up or why. My last sharp memory was coming home from the office Wednesday and feeling the emptiness of this house hit me like a fist in the stomach. I knew I couldn't spend another night talking to the furniture, so I'd gone out and started throwing down vodka martinis.

"Okay, Sandy," I said. "Where'd I meet you?"

She raised her eyebrows. "Hey, you really had a blackout. I'm a hostess at the Dolly Bar."

I frowned and shook my head. I couldn't place it.

"That's a strip joint on Fourth street. Don't you remember *that*?"

"Would I ask if I did?"

"Aw . . . Baby's got a hangover, hasn't he?" She slid off the bed and started toward the door. "I'll get you something for that."

"Never mind. Just tell me when and why you came to my house."

She stopped in the door and turned. A hip stuck out and she cupped her palm over it. "Okay. You came into the Dolly Wednesday night. You bought me a few drinks, then a . . . former friend of mine tried to move in and you hit him. You hit him several times before they threw you out, and I liked the way you handled yourself. I took you with me to my hotel and next morning we came out here."

"What time was that?"

"About eleven."

"*Eleven*? Oh, Jesus." I saw myself staggering into my new tri-level house with a B-girl on my arm. That sort of thing wasn't done in Elysia. It was really PTA and cub scout country—even though its name conveyed a vision of satyrs and fat-hipped Greek women dressed in bunches of grapes. Elysia meant home and family to the men who worked in the city, and I'd broken one of the club by-laws. "Did anyone see you?"

"Well, I guess." Sandy shrugged. "You didn't tell me to sneak in." She paused. "Look, if there's any more questions, I'll be in the john."

She walked away and slammed the bathroom door. A second later I heard a glass shatter in the kitchen.

I padded barefoot down the half-flight of stairs, walking with a bent-knee shuffle to stabilize my aching head. In the kitchen, I found that Marian's gray cat had overturned a flour canister and was anointing the room with white paw prints.

I cornered her and imprisoned her under my arm. I rubbed her behind the ears and surveyed the kitchen.

It was a mess. Odors of stale food and liquor rose from a sink piled high with dirty dishes and glasses. The stove held a stew pan filled with black pebbles which once were beans. I wondered what

Marian would have said; she was the kind of woman who jumped up from the table and started washing dishes before they even cooled.

I saw two plates on the table. One held a puddle of gray grease with a slab of bacon in the center, garnished by a long, auburn hair. My stomach did a half-gainer; eating with Sandy was even less appetizing than sleeping with her.

The cat mewed. "All right, kid," I said. "You first, then the other one."

I shuffled through the long living room and found the front door open. The carpet around it was damp; the door had stood open all night and it had rained. I set the cat on the lawn and nudged her away with my toe.

Around the front steps lay proof that life in Elysia had flowed on without me. Several milk bottles warmed in the sun; I tried to count them but they kept moving. Two newspapers formed a wet, gluey mass on the sidewalk. A third lay near the door, crisp and dry and smelling of ink as I picked it up. I read the date beneath the flag: *Tuesday, July 19.*

Five days, I thought. A drop of sweat traced a cold path down my spine. Oh, Jesus. Five days gone like bootleg liquor down the drain.

I dropped the paper and stood there trying to remember. Nothing came but sweat, cool and clammy under my robe. The sun was a white-hot rivet tacked on a sheet

of blue steel. It couldn't have been much past eight in the morning; I still had time to get to the office. But I remembered the winter sales program I was supposed to have presented to the board last Friday, and I knew that one more day would add little to the devastation.

I raised my eyes and saw my car crosswise in the drive. The back wheels rested on my neighbor's lawn. Now the whole damn town would know. Two women walked past, pushing empty grocery carts. They stared at me, then walked on with the studied concentration of students coming late to class. I was suddenly aware of my bare legs sticking out beneath my robe.

I went inside and slammed the door on the painful sunlight. I needed a drink. My nerves were rubbing together, rasping like the hind legs of a cricket.

The bar was a half-flight down in a basement room with sand-colored tile on the floor. The walls were lined with desert murals, and I reached the bar feeling like I'd just trekked across the Quattara depression on my hands and knees.

But the bar held no bourbon; no scotch. I searched beneath it for the exotic liquors Marian had stocked against the day I reached the level of a party-giving executive. I wondered if she was sitting in her hotel room now, regretting that she'd ripped apart all those detailed blueprints for the future.

All the bottles were empty; we'd

even drained the tall, slim containers of fiery Metaxa. Apparently we'd finished up on creme de cacao: I found two glasses containing a brown, concave residue, dry on the edge and damp in the center, like a pond in a drought.

I prowled the room and found a beer mug containing an inch of bourbon and a shredded cigaret butt. I fished out the butt, gulped down the bourbon, and shuddered like a volcano about to erupt. I swallowed three times before the bourbon gave up and decided to stay down.

After a minute I felt well enough to climb the stairs and call a cab. I felt even better when I'd done that; it would be a relief to get Sandy out of my house.

When I hung up, I found myself looking at the words I'd scrawled on the pad a week before: *Regent Hotel, CA-72700*. The number had cost me an eighty-dollar detective fee, but I'd never used it. I kept reminding myself that it was Marian who got caught cheating; not me. She had to come to me.

I got up and walked upstairs, away from the telephone. Outside the bedroom, I found my suit. It was crumpled, damp and muddy. I lifted it with a bare toe and saw that it had bleached the hardwood beneath it, as skin is bleached by a bandage. I couldn't imagine what fuzz-brained impulse had driven me out into the rain. Maybe Sandy would know . . .

I found her in the bathroom, standing under the shower with her back to me. Behind the portiere of needle-spray she looked like Marian—though a Marian drawn with thick pencil strokes that made my chest ache for the original. I felt a curious urge to shove the girl's head under water and hold it there.

Instead, I tried to make my voice pleasant but brisk. "About finished?"

She halted in the act of lathering her belly. She turned, suds squeezing out between her fingers. "I like it slow, Baby." She smiled with one side of her mouth. "Wanta wash my back?"

I stretched out my hand and jerked the shower curtain together. Once I'd washed Marion's back; but that honeymoon ritual had been shelved several years ago. "Hurry up," I said. "I called a cab."

"A nice big Cadillac and you use a cab?"

I could feel my tiny supply of patience seeping away. "You'll use it, Sandy—the minute it gets here."

"Wearing nothing but soap bubbles?" She ripped off a laugh that tweaked my nerves like a fingernail drawn across a blackboard. "Anyway, I can't leave you, Baby."

"Dammit! My name is Greg. Greg Maxwell."

"I know, Baby . . ."

"Don't call me that!"

"You liked it yesterday."

I walked to the washbasin and started throwing cold water on my face. Talking to Sandy was a pointless ordeal; she'd leave when the cab arrived. I wondered how much money she'd want . . .

I wiped off the mirror and looked at my dripping image with detached, alcoholic disdain. I looked like someone who sang hymns in a skid row mission; a red-haired joker whose big frame hung loose inside an expensive bathrobe, as though tacked together by a hurried carpenter. The pallid face was patched here and there with red-black stubble, interspersed with tiny razor nicks.

I looked down at my hands. The knobby knuckles were scraped raw; the nails were cracked and chipped and tipped with black, dirt-filled crescents. I remembered my wet, muddy suit in the hall, and tried to recall what happened yesterday.

But yesterday was gone. So was the day before, and the day before that. Five days were lost, buried deep among three billion brain cells. A strange, violent character had taken over my body; an idiot who enjoyed being called baby, and went for women who measured an axe-handle or more across the hips. Now he sat back in my mind and smirked from a perch atop a filing cabinet full of memories. "*Get out of here, Maxwell,*" he was saying. "*Those five days were mine, old buddy.*"

"What?"

I jumped at the sound of Sandy's voice. "I didn't say anything."

"You said something about getting out of here."

"Oh, Jesus." My mind was splitting apart; I couldn't remember saying anything. I put both hands to my forehead and squeezed. "Sandy . . . What was I doing in the rain?"

"Don't you even remember that?"

I clamped my teeth together. "Sandy, all I know is that my suit's in a wet, muddy heap in the hall."

"Oh. Well . . ." She was silent a minute, then the shower curtain screeched. She came to stand behind me, enclosing me in her aura of scented bath soap. "You did that Friday night when the guy came to see why you hadn't come to work."

"What guy?"

"Gosh, I don't know his name . . ."

"Dammit! What did he look like?"

"Bug-eyed little fella. Kept eating candy."

"Candy . . ." My mouth went dry, and my skin felt hot and prickly. My boss was Harvey Reed, sales manager. His protruding eyes gave him a look of never quite believing what he saw. He chewed mints chain fashion to blunt a craving for cigarets. "Go on," I told her.

"Well he didn't stay long. He acted kind of teed off . . . didn't even taste the drink I fixed for him."

I whirled to face her. "Why the hell didn't you stay out of sight?"

She froze in the act of wiping her left ear. "Gee . . . I was trying to help. You said he was your boss and I wanted to treat him nice . . ."

"Oh, for God's sake!" I turned back and gripped the washbasin. Harvey was a nut on family integrity: "*A man who can't run his home has no business dealing with customers.*" I remembered him saying that, looking like a surprised chipmunk with the mint tucked in his cheek. "Okay, Sandy. So he saw you. Now how'd the rain get into the picture?"

"I . . . Are you sure you wanta hear?"

I spoke softly, watching my lips move in the mirror. "Sandy, for the last time, I wouldn't be asking if I didn't."

"Okay. Okay. Jesus, I wish you'd get drunk again. You're a lot more fun when you're drunk." She sighed. "Well . . . so when the guy left, you followed him outside telling him he couldn't fire you because you already quit. You had a lot better job with United Oil, you told him. When he drove off you was standing on the lawn yelling at him—"

"Yelling?"

"Yeah, you were giving him hell,

only I couldn't hear you so clear in the house. Then it started raining and you got down on your hands and knees and dug your fingers into the lawn. I went out and asked what you lost. You said we were about to fall off the world and you wanted me to help you hold on . . ." She started to laugh, then cut it short, "I'm sorry, but you did act . . . kind of funny."

I shook my head, trying to clear it. Dark fragments of memory swirled like storm clouds; I remembered feeling that the earth was tipping away from the sun, pitching me into darkness. I'd been afraid of losing contact and flying off into cold, deep space without Marian there to anchor me . . .

"Was it a good job?" asked Sandy. "I mean . . . I guess it was, but you mentioned the deal with the other company . . ."

"I made it up, Sandy. Now let's drop it." The concern in her voice sickened me. I didn't want sympathy; that's why I couldn't go back to the office. I'd mail my resignation; let them believe the story about United Oil. I might even be able to get on there, with a good recommendation—

Oh, sure. Harvey would grab at a chance to recommend me: "*Good man, Maxwell; aside from his drinking problem. Can't blame the boy, of course, considering his domestic situation.*" Damn, damn, damn. Nobody would touch me with a ten foot pole.

An electric shaver whirred, sawing at my nerves. I had a vision of Marian shaving her gently tapered legs. She didn't like me to watch her; shaving was a masculine act that made her feel coarse and indelicate.

I turned to see Sandy with her leg propped on the edge of the bathtub, running a tiny electric shaver along her thick calf. For a moment I watched it chew away the faint stubble, then it dawned on me that it was Marian's shaver. I jerked the cord from the wall plug and the whirring died.

Sandy looked up with her mouth open. "What the hell . . .?"

"Where'd you get that shaver?"

"Why . . . you gave it to me last night."

Last night. I'd been almost sure that Marian had taken it with her; apparently I was mistaken.

I held out my hand. "Let's have it."

She gave it to me, watching my face. I wrapped the cord around the shaver and put it in the medicine cabinet; I'd have to clean it later, when my stomach settled. The air in the bathroom was mushy with the scent of bath soap.

"Did you bring any luggage?" I asked her.

"A suitcase, like you told me."

"Good. I'll help you pack."

She blinked in surprise. "Baby, wait a minute . . ."

"Clean up in here first. Then get dressed." I walked to the door.

"And stop calling me baby."

I walked into the hall and took a deep breath. It didn't help much; I was sick with the knowledge that I'd thrown away ten years of work Friday night.

I found Sandy's cheap pasteboard suitcase in the bedroom and prowled through the house, carrying it open under my arm. Sandy had treated the place like a burlesk runway. I found shoes in the living room, a negligee in my den, and underwear in the basement bar. They were black, sleazy garments that clung to my fingers.

I was nearly finished with the house when I heard a dog barking out back. It wasn't ours; Marian didn't like dogs. I went out and found our neighbor's Dalmatian spraddled on the naked black earth at the edge of the unfinished patio. He was growling at a Beagle I'd never seen before.

I yelled, and they ran off. Then I wondered why the hell I bothered. The patio was Marian's idea; another page torn from her futures book. She'd had it started during my last two-month trip around our sales divisions. The night I came home, I'd found her with the contractor who had the job. He wasn't building a patio then . . .

I went back inside and slammed the door. The next owner could finish the patio. Let him worry about the house and its twenty-five year mortgage. I couldn't handle the payments without a job.

I'd have to move into a cheaper home in a different neighborhood. I had to start fresh in another job; maybe I'd even go back to pushing doorbells. *Damn*. I missed Marian. I needed her calm, realistic approach to problems; without her I was like a centipede with each leg trying to run in a different direction.

First I had to get rid of Sandy. I walked upstairs and found her wet footprints leading to the bedroom. She hadn't cleaned up the bathroom. In the bedroom, I found Marian's closet open, the clothes disarranged. I felt anger rise inside me.

I found Sandy in the kitchen drinking coffee. She wore the blue nightdress I'd given Marian on our last anniversary. I felt a stab of disappointment that Marian had left it behind, then the disappointment changed to anger. "Stand up," I told Sandy.

She rose slowly, her face blank.

"Now take off the robe."

Her face twisted in confusion. "But you *told* me to wear it yesterday."

I covered the distance between us in two quick steps. I gripped her arm and said: "Slip it off gently. I don't want it damaged." Gradually I tightened my grip until she began to move. "That's it. Now the other arm . . . easy."

When it was off she dropped back in her chair, rubbing her arm. "Your hands are strong, you know

that? You oughta see the other marks you gave me." Her lower lip trembled. "I didn't mind them, though. You know why? Because you made me feel like a wife and I went for that. All of a sudden you change . . ." Her eyes grew shiny and her face became pouchy and ugly.

I watched a tear roll down her cheek and felt my skin crawl. I didn't want her tears. "Isn't your cab here yet?"

"Sure." Her mouth twisted. "It's under the table."

"If it doesn't come you can walk. Now get dressed. I want you out of here when my wife comes back."

"Your *wife*? But you—" She closed her eyes for a minute, then opened them. "You sent her away because you caught her cheating on you."

"I didn't actually *catch* her . . ."

"She didn't deny it, you said."

I didn't want to argue, but the urge to justify myself pulled me in like quicksand. "Sandy, I'd been away for two months. During that time I wasn't exactly a . . . perfect husband myself. Anyway, I don't care what she did. She's coming back."

"What about your promise?"

"Promise?"

She stood up, and her weak mouth seemed suddenly firm. "You said we'd go to Mexico. You'd sell the house, draw your money out of the bank, sell your stocks . . ."

"Oh, hell. Don't you realize I have no job? The house is mortgaged, I still owe money on the car, I've borrowed against my stocks. Sandy, you're trying to con the wrong man. I'm damn near broke."

Her chin came up at that. "I'm not trying to con you!"

"Then why don't you leave?"

"Because . . . you said you hated your wife because she was a cold, efficient machine. You liked me because I was warm and passionate and . . . and sloppy."

Suddenly I was tired of the conversation. "Listen, whatever happened during those five days, it's ended. I'm a different man. I've turned inside out. What I hated before, I like now. What I liked before, I now hate. You understand?"

"You hate me?"

"It isn't your fault, Sandy. It's just the way it works out."

"Thanks a lot." She walked to the door, then turned to face me. "You should've stayed drunk, Baby."

She walked out and up the stairs, grabbing her suitcase on the way. I watched her disappear into the bedroom, feeling as though I'd just detached a terrier from my leg.

While I waited for her to come down again, the cab arrived. I went out and told him to wait, then went back inside. I paced the long living room, impatient now that I'd decided to get Marian back. She'd be grateful, I thought,

though she wouldn't show it. She'd be anxious to please, and I'd accept that. I'd have her make chocolate brownies and bring me coffee in bed. I'd loaf for a day or so, warm and musty under the covers with the soft feel of flannel. We'd make small talk and lazy daytime love. Though she thought there was something perverted about love in the daytime, she wouldn't deny me. Later I'd tell her about the job and we'd decide what to do . . .

Sandy came down then, clad in a black sequined gown that must have been her working dress. It covered her just a little better than nothing, but I didn't care. I felt almost grateful to her, the way you feel toward a bore when he goes out the door after a long, trying evening. I pressed a twenty into her hand and said, "That's for the cab, Sandy."

She looked down at it sullenly, then stuffed it into her purse and walked out, the gown tight across her haunches. I hurried to the phone and dialed the Regent Hotel. "Give me Mrs. Maxwell's room," I told the operator.

"Just a moment, sir."

I drummed my fingers on the telephone stand while I waited. In my mind I saw Marian sitting in her room. Her small white hands reposed in her lap, palms up. Her nose had a faint blush of red on the end, just where it began to turn up. She'd been crying, or was about to cry. After a moment she rose,

picked up her purse, and walked to the door. She paused before the mirror; a small woman fashioned without waste of bone and flesh. Her dark auburn hair was pulled back from her temples, the comb-marks straight as plow-furrows on bottomland. On top the hair lay in careful, frozen curls, like a stylized Chinese drawing of the sea. She lifted her hand to touch an imperfection visible only to herself. Suddenly the phone rang . . .

The operator's voice pierced my ear. "Sorry, sir. Mrs. Maxwell checked out yesterday."

My stomach flipped over and a drop of sweat rolled slowly down my back. "Did she . . . leave an address?"

"No sir. Sorry."

I replaced the receiver, tasting a bitterness in my throat. I couldn't think; my mind was like an electrical appliance which had been struck by lightning. It seemed to give off smoke and a faint buzzing sound, but no power.

I heard a noise behind me. I turned to see Sandy standing there.

"I knew she wouldn't be there," she said. "She came here last night."

I could only look at her.

"You . . . sent her away again," said Sandy.

My mouth went dry. I thought of Marian coming home, hoping to be forgiven, finding me in that insane, drunken state and the house ravaged by a four-day orgy. "What . . . what did I say to her?"

"Gee, I don't know. You shoved me into the bathroom when she came. A long time later you came in and said she wouldn't get in our way again."

My face felt tight, as though someone had grabbed the skin at the back of my head and pulled, slitting my eyes and pulling my lips tight across my teeth so that my words came out blurred and fuzzy:

"Was that when I gave you the shaver and the nightdress?"

"Yes." Slowly her eyes grew round. "Baby, you look like you need a drink."

"Oh, Jesus. Jesus Christ." I squeezed my eyes shut and pressed my forehead against the cool, firm wood of the telephone stand. The memory came back all at once, like light returning to a city when the current is restored. It was bright, vivid and unbearable . . .

The argument had lasted a long time, and we'd moved from room to room. Now we faced each other on the patio, and my voice was hoarse and my breath was ragged. Marian was stiff, sober, and firm as a tree; she'd seen the house, she'd sensed the other woman's presence, and now she was leaving. "This time, Greg, I'll never come back." I screamed curses at her. She regarded me with a cool, quizzical expression that drove my fury higher until there was only hate swirling in my mind. I knocked her down and pried a stone from

the patio, lifted it above my head, and smashed it down with all my strength. Afterward, as I pried up more stones, I laughed at the way my hands were shaking.

Sandy's voice came to me from a distant, peaceful land, speaking

with a sweetness that curdled my soul. "Let's get drunk, Baby. Don't worry about her. I'll stick with you. Always."

I heard dogs on the patio, fighting again. This time I knew what they were fighting over.



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TEE VEE MURDER

Lieutenant Tanager ordered a beer. The bartender flicked the selector on the television to "Dance Party", a teen-age rock and roll audience participation program. Tanager eyed the customers. One of these men might be the sex murderer of Peggy Coken.

BY HAROLD R. DANIELS

AFTER so many years as a detective and, later, a lieutenant of the Homicide Division, you come to associate certain streets, certain sections of the city with certain types of crime, Ed Tanager once decided.

A signal 84 from Vincent Street, a poor neighborhood, heavily Italian, usually followed a pattern. He would get to the scene to find a knot of excited people gathered around the victim. It would turn out that the killing was the end product of some sudden, violent quarrel and there was seldom any doubt about the identity of the murderer. Sometimes he was at the scene, waiting for the police to take

him in. On the other hand, an 84 from Kossuth Street, which made up most of the waterfront, more often than not meant a bludgeoning. Tanager would find two people waiting. One would be dead and the other would be the officer who had found the body. Invariably the belongings of the victim would be missing. Sometimes it was hard to make an identification, let alone find the killer.

When Tanager, pouring a second after-supper cup of coffee, got the call from the precinct, the message was, "A signal 84, Ed. 1341 Oak Street. Shall I tell the duty sergeant you're on the way?"

Tanager said, "Sure," puzzling a little. Oak Street. "Any details?"

"Not a thing. The beat patrolman just called it in."

Tanager said, "I'll check in through one of the radio cars when I get there," and hung up. Oak Street. A shabby neighborhood but a decent one. Cement sidewalks, much cracked and two and three family houses, most of them kept up nicely enough. He couldn't remember any crime of violence more serious than a purse snatching on Oak Street.

He kissed his wife absently, told her not to wait up, and went out to the garage, hoping that his middle aged car would start. It had been balky on damp nights, lately. It did start.

He didn't have to slow down in the 1300 block of Oak Street to start checking street numbers. From half a dozen blocks away he saw two patrol cars nosed against the curb, their red blinkers winking like bloodshot cat eyes in the misty darkness. They were spotted beside an alley that ran between two big two-decker houses and was almost exactly halfway between the two nearest street lights.

Tanager wasn't surprised to see the patrol cars already at the scene. He knew what happened on a signal 84. The same officer who called him had first called the chief, even while the radio dispatcher was putting the message out to the patrols. And calls would go through to an

assistant Medical Examiner and to the Commissioner and half a dozen other people, all of them whose business murder was.

One of the officers came forward when Tanager parked his car. He started to speak, recognized Tanager and changed words in mid-sentence. Changed, the words were, "In the alley, Lieutenant."

Tanager walked toward the alley mouth, saying over his shoulder, "Send my sergeant in when he gets here with the gear. And keep everybody else out that doesn't have business in there."

It was almost totally dark in the alley. Tanager took a flashlight from his topcoat pocket and made a pool of light to step in. The alley was less than a hundred feet deep and it ended against a high wooden fence. Tanager had not gone ten feet when a voice challenged him. "Hold it, Mac."

Tanager brushed himself with the flashlight. "Lieutenant Tanager," he identified himself. "Homicide."

The voice said, "OK Lieutenant. Sorry. She's over here. I'm Richcreek. I found her." Richcreek switched on his own flashlight.

The body was that of a young girl. Maybe fifteen, sixteen, Tanager estimated. She was half sitting, half lying against the brick side of one of the tenement buildings, a plaid skirt twisted above her knees and a flannel boy's shirt, badly ripped, covering the upper half of her body.

Richcreek said, "That's why I had my light turned off. I didn't want to look at her. He must have used a piece of pipe on her."

Tanager asked, "Do you recognize her?"

"Not with her face the way it is now. Maybe after they get her cleaned up. Look, Lieutenant—all right if I go on out to the street now?"

"Go ahead." Tanager looked once again at the body—it seemed oddly small, even for a teen-ager—and turned his own light away. He had not asked Richcreek if he had made sure that the girl was dead. Hardly any need to make sure—but he bent and lifted one limp arm. Then he was sure.

Tanager began quartering the alley between the body and the street. Later, when sergeant Hunter showed up with the big mobile lights he could do a better job. Less than six feet from the mouth of the alley he saw half a dozen cigarette stubs. He picked one up. It was damp but relatively fresh. It had not been stubbed out but had been thrown down, lit, to burn itself out. Against the foundation of one of the buildings he saw a red scrap of paper. Bending closer he saw that it was a match folder, empty. He did not touch it.

They came, then. The assistant Medical Examiner and sergeant Hunter with the mobile equipment. Tanager told Hunter to lift the match folder and have it checked

for possible prints and then to get on with the routine of search and measurement while the M.A. did his job. Then he walked out of the alley to the street where perhaps a hundred people were now gathered. He hunted up Richcreek.

"How did you happen to be in that alley?" he asked the patrolman. "Do you check every alley on your beat this early? Or were you having a smoke?"

Richcreek said stiffly, "I don't smoke, Lieutenant. We had a report of a prowler in the alley a couple of weeks ago. Since then I check it everytime I pass it."

"Who made the report?"

"Women named Fogel—lives in the tenement on the right hand side."

"What about the prowler?"

"I've never seen him. She's reported him twice since then. Somebody's been in there. I've seen cigarette butts. I don't know what he wants. You can't see in any of the windows on either side and there's no way to get into the houses through the alley."

Sergeant Hunter came out of the alley, looking for Tanager. When he saw him he drew him aside and held out a red leather purse. "Found this when the M.A. moved her," he said. "Probably the kid's. Her name was Peggy. Peggy Coken. There are some post cards addressed to her in the purse."

Tanager called Richcreek over. "Anybody on your beat named

Coken?"

Richcreek said, "Sure—" and paused. "Oh my good Christ. Peggy Coken! I knew I'd seen that plaid outfit before. She lives in the second floor tenement over the Fogel place."

The crowd moved back from the alley mouth to let the ambulance back in. Tanager intercepted the M.A. as he headed for his car.

"How long has she been dead?" he asked.

"Hour, maybe a little more. The skull was caved in. I'm pretty sure she was criminally assaulted, Ed. I'll be able to tell you more after the autopsy."

Tanager thanked him, musing wryly on his choice of words. Criminal assault. The local papers always used the word in preference to rape out of some vague sense of nicety.

He pushed his way through the crowd to the front stoop of the Fogel house. A middle aged woman with stringy grey hair stood before the door, holding a wrapper tightly about her. She asked, as Tanager approached, "Is it Peggy?"

Tanager nodded. "We think so," he said. "Are you Mrs. Fogel?"

"Yes. I knew something like this would happen. Letting that girl run around with nobody to look after her. Getting her own meals—"

Tanager asked sharply. "What do you mean?"

"Her mother and father. They both work. That's where they are now."

She told him where they worked; the father as a short order cook, the mother as a waitress, both in a big diner on the edge of town. Tanager sent a patrol car to get them. His instructions to the officer driving it—who wanted someone else to do the errand—were: "Don't tell them for sure. Tell them a young girl has been hurt—and we think it might be their Peggy."

Half an hour later there was no doubt about it. Tanager had watched Coken, a thin little man, walk into the alley with big Hunter beside him; had seen him come out again with his face glazed like porcelain; had seen him nod his head at his wife, unable to speak. Now he sat across from Tanager in Mrs. Fogel's kitchen, his hands dangling between his knees, and stared at the floor. From the adjacent room they could hear the murmur of women's voices and the deep, wracking crying of Mrs. Coken.

Tanager asked gently, "Did she ever tell you that a man had accosted her? Maybe one of her school friends got fresh with her? Anything like that?"

Coken shook his head. "She wouldn't have told us. She didn't talk much with us anyway. We weren't close to her somehow. I guess it was our fault. Annie and I both working, we weren't home much." His face contorted, the porcelain glaze beginning to crack. "We were saving to buy a house over in the Cedar Hills develop-

ment. Peggy was starting High School. We used to talk about how she would have a place to bring her school friends. You know. Have a nice house, nice yard . . ." His voice trailed off then rose as he asked starkly, "Lieutenant, what do I want with a house now?"

Tanager didn't have the answer. He drew out from Coken and later confirmed from Mrs. Fogel that Peggy usually came home from school at four o'clock, had a sandwich and a glass of milk and went out again until dark. Where did she go? To visit other girls. To a movie, sometimes. Downtown to window-shop the department stores. Sometimes to the TV station where they had a dance party from four until six. She always came home alone, cooked her own supper—canned soup or spaghetti—or ate, from time to time, with Mrs. Fogel. Coken and his wife usually finished at the diner at nine and came straight home. Peggy was always home when they got there, watching television or doing homework. Except not this night.

On the following morning Tanager sat at a desk littered with soggy paper cups that had held coffee and stared at the only leads that he had. A half dozen cigarette butts. Filter tip Viceroy's. Thinking man's cigarettes. The red paper match folder that he had seen in the alley and that held no prints. A three-foot section of two by four lumber which had been found, at first daylight, a

block from the alley and which was almost unquestionably the murder weapon.

Across from him, Sergeant Hunter said, "It's just ordinary spruce. No fresh saw cuts. Probably picked up where they're dismantling houses to make room for the freeway. I could pick up fifty just like it. Anybody could."

"That's eight blocks away from Oak Street. You think he meant to kill her and carried it along with him to the alley?"

"Not necessarily," Hunter argued. "They haul that stuff away by way of Oak Street. It could have dropped off the truck. He could have picked it up right where it happened."

Tanager studied the match folder. Printed on it in black type were the words "Danny's Grill." Under the words were other lines of type praising Danny's meals and a final line which read, "Salt Lake City, Utah."

Hunter said, "I think that's the best lead you've got. Somebody who passed through Salt Lake City; bought cigarettes at Danny's Grill and got matches with them—."

"We don't know that the murderer dropped them."

Hunter shook his head. "We don't know for sure. We know somebody stood there smoking, waiting for the kid to show up, probably. And he used up that packet of matches and threw them away."

"Salt Lake City is eighteen hun-

dred miles away," Tanager said. "These matches come twenty to the folder—enough for one pack of cigarettes. Any chain smoker would have used them up long before he got here unless he flew. And the man who stood in that alley was a chain smoker. Get out to the airport and get a list of all the people on all the flights that came in by way of Salt Lake City in the last few days. That's for a start."

Hunter left the room and Tanager picked up the phone and asked that a call be put through to the Homicide Division of the Salt Lake City Police Dept. He explained what had happened to the Lieutenant who took the call and got a promise that a check would be made at that end. When Tanager finished the hand of the old octagonal clock on the wall pointed to nine o'clock. He went out to the parking lot, got in his car and drove off.

Peggy Coken had been a freshman at Garden Street High School. Ed Tanager parked his car in a paved lot cluttered with jalopies and hot rods belonging to students and went straight to the principal's office. The principal, a big burly man, had not read the morning papers. He did not know that Peggy Coken had been murdered and he swore and belted the desk with a big fist when Tanager told him.

"Damn it to Hell," he said, "she was a nice little youngster. Not much of a student but she tried

hard. Molested, you said. You mean she was raped, don't you?"

The Medical Examiner's report had been ready for Tanager four hours after the girl's body was found. She had not been—criminally assaulted—as the Medical Examiner had believed but there was evidence that an attempt had been made. Probably she had fought back so well that her murderer had picked up the piece of lumber and clubbed her and then been panic stricken to the point that he had run away.

Tanager told the principal this. The big man raged. "We lock up these vermin and then we let them out over and over until they kill someone. By God, I hope you get him, Lieutenant. Nothing like this ever happened to one of my kids before."

Tanager found himself liking the big man. *His* kids. Probably battled tooth and nail for them with School Boards, Budget Committees, College Examining Boards and what-all. "I'd like to talk to some of her school friends," he said. "You know how it is. Girls tell each other things that they don't talk about with their parents. And if she had any boy friends, I'd like to talk to them."

The principal stood up. "Her home room teacher would know who her friends were," he said. "I'll send them in. You can use my office."

Peggy Coken's best friend, apparently, had been Betty Jean Har-

rington, age fourteen, who came into the principal's office with eyes reddened from crying. She had heard about the murder on a news broadcast—it was all over the school by this time—and in spite of the tears she was infected with excitement.

"The principal said you wanted to see me," she told Tanager.

Tanager said, "Yes. Sit down Betty Jean."

She did, demurely. Tanager began. "Now then, Betty Jean—"

After two hours of it Tanager had learned very little about Peggy Coken . . . largely because there was little to learn. She had been close with several girls of her own age. She had never had a date; had been a member of a group that talked breathlessly and excitedly of dates but had never quite ventured—or been permitted—to have one. She had liked, from a distance, several boys. Tanager spoke to these and verified that her crushes had, indeed, been from a distance. From the last girl he talked with he picked up this one thing: "I used to go with Peggy all the time," the girl said. "Then she started going to the dance party almost every day. I couldn't go because I wasn't fifteen yet and they won't let you if you aren't. Peggy wasn't fifteen either but she said she was and they let her."

Tanager asked, "Dance party? You mean that TV program?"

"Yes sir. It's on every afternoon

between four and six."

Tanager remembered the program vaguely. A time or two he had gotten home early and seen his own school age daughter watching it. It came back to him as a noisy, pointless sort of entertainment. Bunch of teen-age youngsters milling around a dance floor, jockeying to get in front of the camera and then ducking their faces in embarrassment. And giggling. He thanked the youngster and the principal and left the school.

To save time he dropped in at a diner for an early lunch of lamb stew with dumplings. He ate absently, trying to remember the format of the dance party show. The part where the MC walked up to dancing youngsters and asked their names. And asked their names and addresses. "My name is Peggy Coken. I live at 1341 Oak Street."

A man in his thirties dropped heavily onto the stool beside Tanager and lit a cigarette, saying to the counterman, "A cup of coffee, Eddie. Jeez, I need some sleep."

Out of the corner of his eye Tanager caught a glimpse of red paper as the man cupped his hands around the match flame. He thought, there must be ten thousand different kinds of red match folders and this is strictly from a late late movie. Even so he asked, "Have you got a light, friend?"

The man said, "Sure, Mac," and handed Tanager the red paper folder.

Printed on it were the words, "Danny's Grill." And the address—Salt Lake City."

Tanager lit his pipe with a match torn from the folder. He handed it back and said casually, "Nice place, Salt Lake City."

The man asked in a puzzled voice, "What?"

Tanager repeated, "Salt Lake City," and held up the match folder.

The man laughed. "I wouldn't know about Salt Lake City, Mac. I picked those up with a pack of cigarettes." He turned away and bent his head over his coffee.

Tanager rose and stood beside the man. "Where?"

The man was getting irritated. It showed in his face and it was reflected in his voice. "How would I know? How about letting me drink my coffee? You can keep the God-dam matches."

Eddie the counterman, sensing trouble, moved close to ask, "What's the trouble Billy?"

Tanager said, "Police business. Billy is going with me. Unless he wants to talk about those matches." He showed the badge pinned to the flap of his wallet.

Eddie's jaw dropped. "Billy? What do you want with Billy? He hasn't done anything." He added the irrelevant explanation. "He eats here all the time."

Billy himself said, "You don't have to get sore. How did I know you were a cop." In case Tanager were sensitive about the word he

said, "I mean an officer."

Tanager said, "Let it go. What about the matches?"

Billy slapped his forehead with his palm. "I can't remember. I must have bought two or three packs last night."

"What brand?"

"Camels. What I always smoke."

"What places were you in?"

"Nino's Place. And before that The Seven Palms. Wait a minute—I know I bought cigarettes at Nino's because I had to break a five and Nino got sore. When he closed up the place I bought another pack for the morning."

Billy was trying to be conciliatory but without showing any of the inner panic that Tanager would have sensed immediately if there had been any real guilt in the man. After years enough, you knew—but you couldn't be sure enough for this kind of a crime. Tanager said, "Get up, Billy."

The man protested. "I've got to get back to the garage. Think I want to get docked any of my time?"

Tanager said dryly, "I'll square it. Where is Nino's place?"

"Down the street."

"Let's go buy some cigarettes."

Nino's place was a bar with a class B license; a dingy narrow room that smelled of stale beer and cigarette smoke. A fat man in a dirty undershirt was pouring orange sirup into a gallon jug when Tanager walked into the place, half

shoving the man named Billy ahead of him. Tanager asked, "Are you Nino?" When Billy would have answered he said, "Shut up," and waited for the fat man to answer.

The fat man asked, "Cop?"

Tanager said, "Yeah, cop."

"I'm Nino."

"Were you behind the pump last night?"

The fat man nodded.

"Was this man in here?"

"Billy? Sure. Came in after work. Maybe five thirty. Hung around from then until quitting time."

Tanager put a bill on the bar. "Break it," he said. When Nino put change on the bar he shoved it toward Billy. "Buy yourself a pack of cigarettes," he said.

Billy moved across the machine and put two coins into the slot of the ornate cigarette vendor. He pulled the lever under the segment marked Camels and a package of cigarettes and a red packet of matches dropped softly into the slot beneath the brand windows. Tanager reached for them. They were imprinted with the words Danny's Grill. He turned to Nino and asked, "Have you got a telephone under the bar?" When Nino nodded Tanager said, "Give it here," and called the precinct. There was a message waiting for him. The Salt Lake Lieutenant had called back to tell Tanager that Danny's Grill had gone bankrupt and closed up six months ago. Tanager asked for a quick check on Billy—last

name Carter—and asked that Sergeant Hunter be contacted at the airport and told to drop the airline passenger project. There was no blue file—sex offenses—on Billy. When Tanager hung up he said, "You can take off now, Billy. You want me to call your boss and square you?"

Billy shook his head. "I haven't been gone long enough to get docked." A shade of indignation crept into the relief in his voice. "I still think you had a Hell of a nerve dragging me down here. What did you think you had me for? A stick up or something?"

There was a copy of the morning paper on the bar with a smudged picture of Peggy Coken on the front page together with a shrieking headline. Tanager pointed to it. "That," he said.

Billy said, "Oh." He shook his head. "Poor kid. I hope you get the bastard, Lieutenant."

"Sure you do. Get along now or you'll be late."

When Billy had gone Tanager asked Nino, "Who services the cigarette machine?"

"Monaco Novelty Company. They got a sticker on the machine with their address on it."

The Monaco Novelty Company took up the lower floor of a waterfront building with blind, boarded up eyes of windows. The door was locked. Tanager kicked at it until an old man with wary, evil eyes came to answer. The man said,

"You'll have to come back later. I'm busy."

In sudden anger Tanager said, "You're not that busy," and shoved the door open. The place was badly lit and gloomy. Tanager could make out the shapes of outmoded cigarette vendors and a dozen illegal pin ball machines ranged against the walls. The old man grimaced. "Guys have got hurt for coming around here like you did and making trouble. You better get out of here mister before I call Al."

Tanager grinned without humor. "Call Al," he said.

Al came from a back room at that moment. He was a soft looking man with dark, hooded eyes. Tanager said, "I'm a police officer, Al. In case you wanted to do something about it."

Al shrugged. "No trouble. You name it, you got it. What precinct?"

"Homicide Division. So I'm not much interested in picking you up for possession of gambling devices. If I get what I want."

The hooded eyes flickered. "Like I said— you name it, you got it."

Tanager brought out the folder of matches that he had picked up in Nino's place. "These came from one of your machines. Who services them?"

"I got half a dozen guys." Al reached for the matches. "I'm the one who put these matches out though. They're dogs."

"What do you mean, dogs?"

"I bought them up from a jobber.

Guy orders matches with his business name on them and goes broke before he pays for them. So a jobber picks up a big bunch of them, all kinds, and sells them cheap. There were only two boxes of these red ones in the last lot I bought. I put them in the machine myself."

"How many in a box?"

"Twelve dozen. A gross. I still got one box."

Tanager said quietly, "You listen to me now, Al. I'm not going to make things rough for you because I haven't got time. You believe that. It's only because I haven't got the time. I think I can guess which machines you service yourself and why. But you tell me in your own words."

Al said, "Why kid around? I got pin ball machines in maybe thirty bars. I got cigarette machines in the same bars. I service the cigarette machines in those particular bars because I got to service the pinball machines myself. The help I hire wouldn't give me an honest count."

Tanager said, "It figures. How many machines did you put the red matches in?"

"Maybe twenty. I could work it out. I had a half a box of Alka Seltzer matches. Maybe Bromo Seltzer—something like that. When I finished up the box I started in on the box of red matches."

"Is there any chance that any dealer in town got more of them—maybe from the same jobber?"

"A thousand to one shot if they

did. I can check it."

"You do that. Right now. And then give me a list of the bars you're sure you put them in."

"It won't be hard to do that. I follow a regular route. About checking the jobber though—that might take a little time."

Tanager said, "I've got time."

Later in the afternoon Sergeant Hunter said, "That was police work Ed. I mean it. But twenty bars—I don't know. It wouldn't have to be a regular patron. Anybody could have drifted in and bought a pack of cigarettes. We could hit up every one of the bars if you want and see if any of the regulars have a blue file."

Tanager shook his head. "I think we can close it in more than just to twenty bars. Somebody visited one of the twenty and bought cigarettes. That somebody knew where Peggy Coken lived." He pushed the button on the intercom set on his desk and said, "Charlie, has the night sergeant still got that portable TV set stashed away in his locker? The one he watches the fights on?"

Charlie said, "You're not supposed to know that, Lieutenant. He has it but he keeps his locker locked."

"And you've got half a dozen short timers in the tank that could open the Chase National. Bring me that set. I'll fix it with the sergeant."

When the set was brought in, Tanager drew the shades to darken the room and switched it on. The

TV dance party was in full swing on a local channel. Couples—some of them looked as young as twelve—swung by the camera. Most giggled or smirked. Some pretended loftily that they didn't notice the camera. Sergeant Hunter growled, "They ought to be home doing their homework."

The camera cut away from the party long enough for a commercial that showed a young woman smoking a cigarette with almost obscenely sensual delight. The camera, cutting back to the party, picked up the MC, a serious young man in a crew cut, who delivered some smooth patter about the next record he would be playing in just a minute—. Tanager switched the set off. "Take it on back and have Charlie lock it up again."

"Sure, Ed. Where are you going?"

"I want to talk to bright boy with the Butch haircut."

Tanager's police badge brought out the TV station manager. Tanager said, "I want to talk to the man running the teen-ager show."

"Dilly Bates? Sure, Lieutenant. He's just going off now."

The manager led the way down a corridor to a door with a light over it that flashed from red to green just as they reached it. The room was noisy with the bustle of the youngsters who had been on the dance party, looking more like healthy kids and less like zombies than they had looked on camera.

The station manager pushed his way fretfully through the mob to a group of three men. One of the men was the MC—Dilly Bates. The other two—they looked bored—were camera men. The manager said nervously, "Dilly—this is Lieutenant Tanager. He's from the police." Dilly stuck his hand out while the two technicians looked interested.

Bates glanced at the picture and pushed it back toward Tanager. "I don't know," he said. "So many of them come up here, I can't tell them apart. What did she do? Run away from home? I suppose the program will get blamed for it. Everything kids do that's wrong, TV gets blamed for it. I get sick of it."

The cameraman took the picture from Tanager. He said, "Bates, you stink!" He got a lot of contempt into the three words before he turned to Tanager. "I've seen his kid, Lieutenant. She's the one that was in the paper this morning—the one that got killed?" When Tanager nodded the cameraman said, "She was a regular here. Two or three times a week. Nice, friendly little kid."

Tanager faced Bates. "Two or three times a week and you didn't remember her?"

The cameraman drawled, "You got to remember, he's big-time, Lieutenant. A year ago he was making forty a week selling spot commercials but now he's big time. Even tells me about camera angles."

Bates said thinly, "I guess I do

remember her. Now that I think about it."

"Ever interview her during a dance? That routine you use where you ask where the kids live and what school they go to?"

"I don't remember," Bates said.

The cameraman shook his head. "You're not very bright today, Dilly. You interviewed her twice that I remember. And once for tape."

Bates said, "Like Hell. I never taped the show."

"Maybe you didn't. Crouthamel did—didn't you Johnny?"

The second cameraman said, "Sixty grand worth of equipment to make tape. We tried it out on a dozen local broadcasts before we bought it. You pretty sure I got the kid in the picture Rosy?"

Rosy, the first cameraman, said, "I'm damned sure. I've got a kid looks like her. You know, dark hair and a pretty smile. So I used to pan in on her a lot. You want us to run it off for you on the monitor, Lieutenant?"

Tanager did. While Crouthamel went for the tape he asked questions. Any incidents involving teenage girls on the show and the youths who partnered them? Did they come stag? Were any precautions used to see that the youngsters got safely out of the building? For an answer, a suddenly cooperative Dilly Bates gave him a ten-minute lecture on the production and operation of the show. At the end of

that time Crouthamel had the tape set up. In a darkened room they watched the youngsters dance on the monitor set; watched Dilly Bates, finally watched a dark haired, smiling youngster whirl up to the camera, full face. In the darkness Rosy said, "I closed right in on her. Got a nice light on her forehead and eyes. See that?"

The girl was Peggy Coken. The camera backed out slowly and Dilly Bates walked toward her, trailing a microphone cord. "And what's your name, honey?"

"My name is Peggy Coken. I live at 1341 Oak Street."

It was exactly as he visualized it as happening—except that he had it, actually had it and for all time on the tape that Johnny Crouthamel had filmed. He had it, Tanager mused. The problem—where to use it and how.

Back in his office, Tanager blocked out on a City Directory map, the locations of the twenty bars where Al had serviced cigarette vendors with the Salt Lake City match folders. Sergeant Hunter was still skeptical. Tanager explained patiently, "Take a look at these locations. The closest one is two miles from the alley where the girl was killed. These aren't nightclubs. They're men's bars, most of them, and cheap cafes. They have regulars—people who live in nearby rooming houses and tenements. If one of them dropped that match folder on Oak Street—two miles

away, mind you—it follows that he went out there deliberately and waited for Peggy."

Hunter said, "It might have been some guy that lived out that way. Maybe he went in the alley to relieve himself and dropped the matches then."

"Guys that live out that way wouldn't be patronizing bars on this side of the city. And he stayed in the alley long enough to smoke half a dozen cigarettes." Tanager leaned forward. "The man that smoked those cigarettes and threw away that match folder killed Peggy. And he got the match folder in one of these twenty places." Tanager thumped the map with the side of his fist. "Maybe you don't see it—but I do. And he learned where she lived by seeing her on that stupid TV show."

Hunter stood up. "You sold me, Ed. Now what?"

Tanager said, "Now we cut down that twenty figure." He told Hunter how he planned to do this. The big Sergeant grinned.

"It can't miss, Ed. Give me my ten."

Tanager shook his head. "You stand out too much in a crowd—and every bartender in the city knows you're a cop. They'll figure you're going in those joints to check for pinball machines and freeze up on you. I'll take half and give the other half to some kid from Traffic Division who won't be spotted."

At four the following evening

Tanager, dressed in the worn tweed slacks and gray pullover sweater he used for puttering in the garden, walked into the first on his list of ten bars and ordered a beer. There was a television mounted on a platform to the right of the bar. Tanager nodded at it and asked, "Anything good on?"

The bartender shrugged. "I wouldn't know. It's been busted two months and the owner's too cheap to get it fixed."

The second bar had no television set. At the third, the television set was on. An ancient British movie was being shown. Tanager ordered a beer—he had only half finished the two he had ordered in the other bars—and said, "How about changing channels?"

"What do you want to watch?"

"That music program. Dance party."

The bartender said, "Like Hell. Anything else you want, ok, but not that one. That kind of music drives me nuts."

Tanager came at last to Mooneys. It was a squalid place, smelling of urinals and old clothes. A dozen men stood at the bar. Of the dozen, half were raptly watching the picture on a huge and new looking television set where young girls and their partners were swaying to and fro.

Tanager ordered bottled beer in this place. The man beside him was in his fifties. Unshaven and dirty, he watched the screen with avid

eyes and open mouth. When a pretty youngster of not more than fifteen swirled too rapidly so that her skirt billowed out, showing her thin, immature legs—far less than a pair of shorts would have exposed—the man nudged Tanager with his elbow. "Looka that now! Boy, aint that some stuff."

Tanager, hiding his revulsion, said "Yeah." He studied the men at the bar. Of the six or so who were intently watching the show, two had the same rapt, fixed expression as the man at his side. The others seemed to consider the show mildly entertaining, nothing more. They looked away often to talk to their neighbors. The rapt ones did not. Of the rapt ones, in addition to his neighbor, one was another dirty oldster in an Army overcoat. The other was a stocky man in his early thirties who clutched his glass so that the knuckles showed white whenever one of the youngsters on the show danced by with a saucy bouncing of a scrawny bottom. For these rapt ones, Tanager thought, the image of the youngsters dancing on the picture tube was distorted and perverted as if the glass of the tube itself was imperfect. They saw an average group of youngsters having a good time dancing and into this they read something else again. Like the degenerates who underlined the suggestive words and passages in hotel bibles they marked with their eyes each passage of an unformed breast

beneath a loose sweater; each skirt-swirling glimpse of chicken-scrawny thigh.

He would have liked to have had each of the rapt ones picked up and booked for investigation but he didn't dare to take this step. If the killer of Peggy Coken was still hiding out in fear and heard that the police were picking up hangers on in taverns, he might—if he had not already done so—silently vanish from the city. To prove to himself that the wet-eyed rapt watchers were regulars he waited until he heard each of them called by name by a neighbor or the bartender.

Tanager found the dance party tuned in in three out of the ten bars he covered. Young Crump, the youngster from Traffic Division had seen it in two of the bars he covered and had nearly been thrown out of two more for asking the bartender to switch channels to watch it.

"But I saw some queer characters, Lieutenant," he reported to Tanager. "Some of them watched these young girls—I don't know how to say it. Wrong, though. Something filthy in just the way they watched and talked."

Hunter growled, "We could pick up every one of them in half an hour. And we could damn well find out if one of them bludgeoned that little girl."

Tanager shook his head. "Or you might scare him away for good."

"Hell, Ed, if you're sure it's somebody that hangs out in one of those

places—and I've already bought that—we can't miss."

"I've got a better idea," Tanager said. He explained it.

He was sitting in Mooney's Place on the following afternoon when the dance party began. The three men he had noted the previous day were there and several more who watched the program in the way that young Crump had described as "wrong." Tanager had put in a good deal of time on plans. In each of the five bars that carried the program, a seasoned cop in old clothes also sat waiting. Tanager watched and waited. He had taken a seat next to the stocky man who clenched his fist when the camera closed in on a pretty youngster. A fifteen-year-old in high heels whirled by and Tanager said, "Nice eh?"

The stocky man grimaced and said something so indescribably foul that Tanager had to make an effort to keep from knocking him from his stool. At precisely four thirty Tanager looked away from the TV set. He was looking for reactions. On the screen behind him a young girl was coming on camera full face. Dilly Bates, the MC was saying "And what's your name honey?"

And the answer. "My name is Peggy Coken. I live at 1341 Oak Street."

There was no perceptible reaction. Tanager felt an immense let down. No matter. He would have

the station run the tape of Peggy Coken into the program again in an hour or so. He could do it once, maybe twice again before public shock forced an explanation of what he had been trying to do.

A squad car ground to a halt in front of Mooney's and big Hunter came racing in.

"Got him, Ed. Joe Wharen's got him in the car," he said.

A thin oldish looking man sat beside Sergeant Joe Wharen in the squad car. He was sobbing hysterically, huddled in a dirty topcoat.

Wharen said proudly, "I sat next to him at the bar because he had a pack of Viceroys in front of him. He giggled all the time the show

was on—but when the tape of the Coken kid came on he screamed like a woman. 'Go away,' he kept yelling. He admitted it the minute I put the arm on him. Like he was grateful I was doing it."

Tanager said, "That's nice work Joe. Take him on down. I'll be right along."

Hunter said, "What are you going to do Ed?"

Tanager, thinking of the stocky man, said, "I'm going to make a pinch. Come on if you want to."

"Sure. You spot somebody hot?"

"No. I won't be able to make a charge stick probably. This one's for general principles. And he just might resist arrest."



Mildred responded amazingly to hypnosis. The psychologist was quite pleased with the transformation and so was Mildred . . . for a while.

BY
WILLIAM
O'FARRELL



DEATH AND THE BLUE ROSE

SHE REALLY is extremely plain, the psychologist-who-was-dabbling-in-hypnosis thought. Not ugly; ugliness has its own sharp personality. Her personality is vapid, as flat as soda water left standing overnight. But of course he did not say so. He said, "Just look at the light, Mildred. Concentrate on

it. Nothing exists for you except my voice and the light."

Mildred stared at the light. It was a bright pinpoint that got bigger as the soothing voice went on. It grew and grew until it filled the room. The voice told her that she was getting sleepy, and it was true. She could hardly keep her eyes

open. "Sleep," it said. "Shut your eyes and sleep . . ."

She slept, but still she heard the voice. It told her pleasant things which she believed. It asked questions which she answered truthfully. A lie would have been an impossible negation of this curiously real sleep. Her answers were hesitant at first but, as she learned about herself, they came more rapidly and were spoken with assurance. This was a friendly voice. She liked to talk to it.

It said, "More than anything, what would you like to be?"

"Beautiful," she said.

"What else?"

"I would like to be . . . kind of stronger, not embarrassed all the time."

"You're a lovely girl, Mildred—desirable, self-confident. You must believe that. Do you believe it?"

"Yes."

"You have a forceful character. You're able to cope with any situation, no matter how difficult. Do you believe that?"

"Yes."

The psychologist scribbled in a notebook. "Responds well to suggestion. Sudden unaccustomed resonance in voice." He glanced at Mildred's face and a startled expression came into his own. "Responds amazingly," he wrote, and put his pencil down.

"Very well. Here you are, an attractive and assured young woman. What would you like to do?"

"Get that job as salesgirl and handle beautiful things and . . ."

"Go on."

" . . . fall in love with a man and . . . have him fall in love with me and . . ."

"Yes?"

" . . . nothing would ever frighten us because we would have each other, and we would travel."

"Where?"

"Everywhere. Europe, Mexico, around the world and . . ."

"Go on."

" . . . people would say what a lovely couple we were, so very much in love."

"That's all?"

"That's all," she said.

He was silent for a moment. "What is your favorite flower?"

"A rose."

"Your favorite color?"

"Blue."

"In the future," he said, "when I speak the words, 'Blue Rose,' you will immediately fall into light trance. You will become the beautiful, confident girl you are right now. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Furthermore, you will be able to put yourself into the same light trance. All you have to do is say, 'Blue Rose,' aloud. Between now and the next time you come to see me I want you to do this every day. Just say, 'Blue Rose.' Will you do it?"

"Yes."

"Good. That will save us a lot of

time. Any questions?"

"No."

"I'm going to wake you now. You'll feel fine and you'll remember everything I've said. You *do* feel all right?"

"Wonderful."

"Very well, I'll count to three. At the count of three you will wake up. Ready? One . . . two . . . three!"

Mildred awoke as the psychologist drew away the curtains from the window and let in the pale sunshine of a late summer afternoon.

"How do you feel?" He came back from the window.

She held an exquisite little handkerchief to her nose. "All right, I guess."

"Put away the handkerchief, Mildred. It's much too small to hide behind." He smiled. "Do you remember everything I said?"

She nodded, eyes on the handkerchief as she returned it to her bag. "I remember but . . . well, those words. Just saying words'll never make me change."

"But you will say them, won't you? Aloud, once every day. If your personnel manager was confident that I could help you, I should think you'd try to get some benefit from your visit."

"Well, I'll try," Mildred said. She added quickly, "But isn't it dangerous? Suppose I hypnotize myself and don't come out of it?"

"You'll come out of it." He sat

down at his desk. "The state wears off naturally within an hour."

"Suppose I do something I shouldn't do, something I wouldn't do if I were—well, normal."

"You won't. No one in hypnosis can do anything, or be made to do anything, he is not inherently capable of doing." He leaned back in his chair. "If I hypnotized you and told you to kill yourself you'd wake up immediately. Unless, of course, you wanted to commit suicide anyway." His voice grew gentle. "I want you to look at the couple in my reception room as you go out. The girl used to be my patient; she was very much like you. She's engaged to the young man. They're going to Europe on their honeymoon."

Mildred said incredulously, "She was like me?"

"She could have been your sister." He rose. "See you again next week."

She left the office. She saw the couple in the outer room. The man was holding the girl's hand, listening attentively to her low, animated voice. He was handsome. The girl—well, she wasn't pretty but she was attractive; she was interesting. Interesting because she was interested, Mildred thought. She was interested in the man and in whatever it was that she was telling him, in the ring on her engagement finger, in the rough male pressure on her hand. Passing them, Mildred saw her own reflec-

tion in a mirror. Her clothes were in good inexpensive taste, but her face was an embarrassed blank.

It was a long bus ride to the section of the city in which she lived. She bought a paper and glanced at the headlines while waiting for a bus. **TEEN-AGER KILLS MOTHER**, she read, and something about a daring daylight bank robbery; then she opened the paper and folded it to the feature page. She frowned. *Anne Arden Advises* wasn't in its customary place. She went carefully through the paper twice before she was willing to admit that, for some frustrating reason, the column had been omitted for that day. The bus was coming. She dropped the worthless sheet into a trash can plastered with a sign that warned her not to be a litterbug.

All the seats were taken on the bus. Standing passengers were crowded in the aisles. For half an hour she clung to a strap, lurching forward when the bus stopped, backward when it started, and at both times bumping into other standees, men. They looked at her coldly. Mildred put both hands on the strap and hid her face between her upraised arms. Reaching her stop, she was unable to fight her way to the door before the bus was once more on its way. She was carried two blocks beyond her corner, walked back through an unprepossessing neighborhood on fatigued feet.

The neighborhood, fashionable fifty years before, was a desert of old brownstone fronts spotted with oases of bars and delicatessens. In a delicatessen she bought a jar of artichoke hearts, three slices of chicken, coffee and a loaf of low-caloric bread, and she carried them past a small night club to the shabby brownstone front next door. She climbed the steps, pushed open the never-locked front door and forced herself up three flights of stairs to 3-A, her own apartment. She unlocked the door, went inside, bumped the door shut and leaned against it for a moment, resting. She was home.

Home was a single narrow, spotlessly clean room. It had two windows, one on the side overlooking the night club, the other affording a view of similar windows across the street. Both were furnished with pull-down shades for privacy and plastic curtains for decoration. The only other decorations were three gaily tinted travel posters on the walls. A studio couch stood in a corner and, across the room from a door that opened on the bath, there was the Pullman kitchen where Mildred made her morning coffee and, this time of year, prepared her light, cold suppers. In winter she thawed out frozen foods.

She carried her groceries to the built-in kitchen, opened the artichoke hearts, put the slices of chicken on a plate. She ate her supper

sitting on the couch, and afterwards she must have fallen asleep.

How long she slept she didn't know, but music from the night club was coming through her open window when she awoke, so it was late. It was nice music and louder than it usually was. She listened to it as she washed and dried her plate and fork. She would have gone to bed then had it not been for a light tapping on the door. Only one person ever called on her. Mildred opened the door for Ollie, her neighbor from the apartment across the corridor.

"What's cooking, Mil?" he said as he came in.

That was Ollie. A stocky, dark man with a clicking denture, he thought and spoke in stale clichés. He had a job as a stock clerk and he'd have the same job until he died. If he had been her older brother Mildred might have recognized and forgiven in him certain family failings similar to her own. But as a suitor she found him intolerable.

He sat on the couch and grinned at her. "So hot this noon you could of fried eggs on the sidewalk. See the head-shrinker?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"Waste of time and money, you ask me. What's eating that personnel manager of yours?"

"Mrs. Riesler thought hypnotism might make me . . . well, less bashful. And if it works maybe she'll give me a counter job, talking

to nice people, selling perfume or— or those lovely Italian shirtwaists. Maybe it'll work."

"Horsefeathers! I admire your ambition, Mil, but you ain't got a chance."

Mildred walked over to the window. She stood with her back to it and listened to the music. When she spoke next it was as though she were dreamily reciting the lyrics of a sentimental song. "There was a girl. She used to be his patient. He treated her for the same thing he's treating me. You should have seen her. She was . . . happy."

"Anybody can be happy that's not too busy being miserable."

"Not like them," she said.

"Them who?"

"There was a man with her—her fiancé. They were so glamorous . . . so much in love."

"Shut the window."

"Shut the window," he repeated. "Something I got to tell you, and I can't think with all that noise."

She started to obey but changed her mind. "It's too hot," she told him, "and I like the music. It makes me forget where I am."

"That's what's the matter with you—not facing up to facts. Now, look here," he said. "You're all the time talking about glamour and travelling and romance. Well, that's a lot of hooey. You and me ain't glamorous and we're never going to travel nowhere. So why not make the best of what we've got?"

"It's hard to make the best of nothing," Mildred said.

"You're mixed up." He got up, and crossed the room toward her. "Between us we got the most important thing there is—two pay-checks every week. We get married, pool those pay-checks, cut down expenses by moving into one apartment and all of a sudden we start saving money. Pretty soon—maybe ten, fifteen years—we got enough to buy ourselves a chinchilla farm. Big money in chinchillas." His denture slipped as unexpectedly he laughed. "You ain't the only one that dreams, Mil—see? In my own way, I'm romantic, too."

She evaded his caress by circling back into the room. "Please—I have a headache. I want to go to bed."

"But you do see, don't you?"

"That you have dreams? I see," she told him. "The trouble is that your dreams aren't the same as mine."

She finally managed to get rid of him. The sound of the closing door brought her considerable relief. Some wind-trick made the music from the night club swell. She crossed to the window and looked out and down.

Two stories below her was the night club's roof. Its center section was one big skylight of frosted glass. On this warm summer night it had been lifted; Mildred could look almost straight down into the club. She saw a tiny dance floor and one end of the bar.

A man sat at the bar. From a height of two stories it's hard to tell much about anyone's appearance, but she somehow sensed he was good-looking. He had black hair and something must have amused him: he threw his head back and Mildred caught a flash of white teeth framed by laughing lips. She wondered what his name was. Vic? David? Earl? No name seemed quite to fit him. Her pulse was rapid as she turned from the window and started to prepare for bed.

The name of the man at the bar was Ricky. He was a charming rat. On this particular evening he was more than slightly drunk. It was a happy drunk, however, for it was Ricky's nature to be happy. When a guy's got less than an even chance of living until morning—what the hell?

Two men entered the night club from the street. Hard-faced types like the ones you see in gangster movies. They kept their hats on and stood at the edge of the dance floor looking over the customers. Ricky chuckled. He knew who they were looking for, and—this was the point of the joke—they wouldn't know him when they found him. He signaled Tom, the barkeep, for a refill on his drink.

Tom caught the signal but kept polishing a glass. He, too, watched the men. They walked to the bar and spoke to him. He shrugged

and shook his head. Tom should have been an actor, Ricky thought.

One of the men left the bar. Tom poured the other one a drink. Carrying the bottle, he came down to Ricky. "You're the target," he muttered, filling Ricky's glass. "Get going before my bar's all over blood."

Ricky hoisted the drink. "No blood," he promised, "but I'll get out. Know why? 'Cause you're my friend. One more, then I'll blow."

Tom jerked the bottle out of reach. "Use the side door. The drummer's fingered you."

Tom was right. The guy who'd left the bar was talking to the three-piece combo. The drummer was pointing at the stool on which an instant before Ricky had been sitting. He was sitting there no longer. He had plunged into the human forest on the dance floor. He was plowing through the forest headed for a door that opened on a yard-wide alleyway on the other side of the club.

He made it, but the two men saw him as he was slipping out. Ricky slammed the door and started to run along the side of the building toward the street. In the darkness he fell over an ash can. Picking himself up, he saw an open door. He jumped inside and shut the door and locked it as the men exploded from the night club.

They threw themselves against the door. Ricky didn't wait to see if they could break it down. Steps

led upward to a dimly lighted landing. He climbed them quickly, and ran up three more flights of stairs before he tripped on the top step and fell headlong in a corridor. He lay there laughing quietly to himself.

Mildred heard the thud. She had been about to remove the day cover from the couch. Instead of doing so, she replaced the sofa pillows, went hesitantly across the room and put her ear against the door. Someone was in the corridor. She could hear his heavy breathing.

"Who's out there?" she called.

There was no answer but the sound continued. Ollie's apartment was across the corridor; it would be safe enough to look. She drew the bolt and turned the key. Cautiously she pulled the door inward until she had a three-inch space through which she could see.

The light from the room streamed through the space to make a narrow upright strip of brightness on the wall. At its foot a man sat, knees hunched up, head resting on his knees. He looked harmless. She opened the door wide and stepped into the corridor.

"You sick?" she asked.

He raised his head and grinned at her. He had black hair and his grin revealed white, perfect teeth. Mildred half-turned to reenter her apartment, but froze as he got quickly to his feet.

"Hi, Beautiful." He put his arms

around her and kissed her on the lips. "Hello, you lovely thing," he said.

Mildred had been kissed before. Under a mistletoe during the Christmas holidays, the year she'd been thirteen, a boy had given her an experimental peck. Three years later another boy, taking her home from a De Molay party, had dutifully kissed her good-night. This was different. It was the first time she had ever received a thorough kissing. The fact that the man had been drinking didn't signify. She looked with wonder at his handsome face. There was blood on his right cheek.

"Why, you've been hurt!" she said.

He hadn't known that. He was surprised when he touched his cheek and, looking at his fingers, saw the blood.

"Just scratched, Beautiful," he told her. "Ash can scratched me. Happens all the time."

"I'll put a Band-aid on it," she said. "Come inside."

He followed her a little unsteadily through the door. Mildred locked it. She went into the bathroom and had just found a pack of sterile bandages when the lights in the living room went out. Returning, she saw him as a shadow standing at the window. He was looking down into the street.

"Why did you turn out the lights?" she asked.

He didn't answer. She came up

and stood beside him. Down on the sidewalk, at the corner of the alleyway that separated the night club from the brownstone front, two cigarettes glowed orange-red. Otherwise, except for the neons of the corner bar, the street was lifeless, dark.

She started to ask another question. "Who—?"

He interrupted by pulling down the shade and turning on a small desk lamp. "Process servers, Beautiful. Want to give me li'l paper I don't want to get. This house got trap-door to roof?"

She nodded. "But it's chained and locked."

"Oh, well—get caught sooner or later anyway. End of the road," he said.

"Why do you talk like that—as though nothing mattered?"

He flashed that charming grin again. "Does it?"

"Oh, yes! Some things matter a lot. Go wash that cut so I can bandage it."

"You're the boss, Beautiful," he said.

Mildred felt a warm glow as she went to the kitchen. She liked doing things for him; he was nice. She measured water and coffee into the percolator and set it on the stove. Behind her in the bathroom she heard water flowing from a tap.

"I'm fixing you some coffee," she called. "It'll do you good. What's your name?"

"Ricky."

She repeated the name as she turned back to the living room. Ricky. She liked it. There wasn't anything about him that she didn't like. But he, of course, would never look at her. Calling her *Beautiful*, the way he had, was just a joke.

His jacket was lying on the floor beside the chair from which it must have fallen. She picked it up and pressed it to her breast. An envelope tumbled from an inside pocket. It brushed against the chair before it landed on the floor. The jostling nudged a sheath of bank notes through its unsealed flap.

Mildred stared at the money. Then, very deliberately, she picked up the envelope, pushed the notes inside and returned it to the pocket from which it had fallen. She hung the jacket on the chair and turned away.

She didn't quite make it to the kitchen. The continuing rush of water in the bathroom assured her that she could yield, a little, to temptation without fear of being caught. She ran back to the chair, took the money from Ricky's pocket and counted it.

The amount stunned her. The envelope contained fifty one-thousand dollar bills. She held on to the chair with one hand and clutched a fortune in the other. It was the second "first" of this enchanted evening. A man had kissed her, and now she had been given a sign

that no dream is so improbable that it cannot be achieved if only the dreamer cares enough and dares enough.

She didn't dare. That was the humiliating truth. Ollie was right. She would have to make the most of what she had. She put the money where it belonged, went slowly to the kitchen for a cup and saucer.

When she heard the words, "Blue Rose," she thought at first some other girl had spoken them. The Mildred she knew would not have had the nerve.

Ricky couldn't figure it. When he'd hit this pad half an hour ago he hadn't thought much about the dame one way or the other. Pretty? All dames looked good to him when he was drunk. This one looked better than most because she had a room where he could stay alive a few hours longer. But now, three cups of hot black coffee later, he took another look at her and got the impression that somewhere along the line she'd changed. When he'd first seen her she hadn't been so—what was the word?—dynamic. *This* dame had something on the ball!

"Not for me," he said when she offered him more coffee. "You filled me up already, boss."

"I like the other name you called me better."

"Beautiful? Well, you are. You know something?" he added after a puzzled study of her face. "Pret-

ty dames come thirteen for a nickel. I don't know what it is but you got more than prettiness."

He got up restlessly. Pacing the room, he stopped before a travel poster and read the printed words aloud.

"*Plaisirs de France.* Pleasures of France," he translated. "See? I can read it. Lots of French words are like Italian words."

"You speak Italian?"

"Why not? Born in Palermo. Like to be there now. Know where it is?"

She nodded. "Sicily. I'd like to go there, too."

"Why not?" he said agin. He sat beside her on the couch. "There's lots of things you and me could have a good time doing. You're a sweet kid. If it wasn't for one thing, you and me could have a ball."

"Two things," she corrected him. "Two process servers waiting for you in the street."

"Forget those bums!" he said with sudden anger; and then was silent, listening to the music from the club. "Nice music," he said. "Want to dance?"

They danced. Round and around the room Mildred, formerly a clumsy dancer, floated in his arms. His cheek was warm on hers.

"Who are they?" she asked quietly. "What do they really want?"

"Like I told you, they're trying to plaster me with a little piece of paper. I'm a contractor. The grand

jury wants to ask about a contract I got with the city. I hate answering questions. From anybody, including you."

She smiled knowingly. "Just one more. I won't ask another."

"Go ahead," he sighed.

"Do contractors usually carry thousands of dollars in their pockets—and revolvers in shoulder holsters?" Her hand crept between them and touched the revolver as she spoke.

He pushed her away roughly. His eyes were gelid. For a second Mildred thought he was about to knock her down.

"Well," she said, still smiling, "do they?"

The coldness slowly faded from his eyes. "You beat me. You really do," he said. "You could have taken that money while I was in the bathroom. You're smart. Why didn't you?"

"Because I am smart." She walked to the couch and sat down in her former place. "I'll admit that it occurred to me to do just that. But what would the money have bought me? When I walked out of this room I would have been walking out on you." She paused, looking at him thoughtfully. "Do you understand me—what I'm trying to say?"

"I'm beginning to read you, Beautiful. Keep sending."

"All right. I could have caught a plane, gone anywhere," she said. "But when the plane landed—

wherever it landed—I'd still be alone. I want—"

He broke in. "Hold it. Before you say what I think you're going to say, I got to tell you something. I'm in the rackets, kid."

"Then so am I. I want to be in anything that you are, Ricky. I want you."

"Funny," he said softly, after a long silence. It was as though he were talking to himself. "A guy can be a wrong guy all his life. He gets started that way. Nobody expects him—he don't expect himself—to be anything except what he is. Then, at the last minute"—his voice grew stronger—"he finds something, somebody, that makes him wish to God he wasn't the wrong guy he is."

"The last minute," Ricky. What's that mean?"

"What it sounds like." He walked to the couch and stood above her, looking down. "As soon as I hit the sidewalk I'll be dead. The money you saw was part of the take from that bank job today."

She said incredulously, "I saw something about that in the paper. You mean that you—?"

He shook his head. "I high-jacked one of the mob. He must have lived long enough to tell the other guys my name. They know that and they know where I live. That's all. They still got only a vague idea of how I look."

She caught his hands. "Suppose you just stay here. Is there any-

thing they can do?"

"Plenty. Pretty soon—if he hasn't showed already—a third guy will come along and give my description to those hoods. They'll call for reenforcements and go through this house room by room." He grinned. "Let's face it; I'm a dead duck, Beautiful." He pulled her to her feet. "And you're a honey of a dancer. Let's live it up while I still can."

Mildred broke away from him. She got her suitcase from the closet, threw it on the bed. She went back to the closet for her clothes.

He nodded his approval. "They won't stop you. Check in at a hotel and come back in the morning. It'll all be over then."

She swung around to face him. "You think I'd do a thing like that? I'm going to get us out of here," she said.

Mildred wasn't carrying her suitcase when she ran through the front door into the night. She hesitated on the sidewalk, then ran diagonally across the street toward the neons of the corner bar. They caught her as she reached the curb. One of them grabbed her arm.

"Where you think you're going, sister?"

"Don't stop me!" She was breathing so heavily that she could hardly speak. "Have to call the police!"

"Trouble, huh? No phone in that house you just come out of?"

"Out of order. Anyway, he

wouldn't let me use it. Let me go!"

"Sure, sure—in just a minute. Who is *he*?"

"Never saw him before. Said his name was Ricky." She spoke in disconnected phrases. "Crazy drunk. Forced his way into my apartment. Told me how much money he had. Thousands. He tried—he tried—"

"I get it." The man smiled with one-half of his mouth. "Good-looking blackhaired guy?"

"Why, yes," she said, surprised. "You know who he is?"

"Never mind. Has he got the money with him?"

She shook her head. "I told you he was drunk. Bragged about how clever he'd been to mail it to himself at home."

The other man broke in. "I'll take over. We know where he lives. We can get the money later." He turned to Mildred. "This guy's in your apartment?"

She pointed upward. "There he is!"

Both men looked at the third floor window she had indicated. A shadow had just crossed the drawn shade. It disappeared and, as they watched, came back again. This time it stayed.

"Number of your apartment, sister?"

"3-B."

"Both of you wait here," the man said.

He crossed the street and climbed the steps of the brownstone

front. The man who stayed behind kept a tight grip on Mildred's arm. A minute passed in the jerky rhythm of an ant dragging an object a hundred times heavier than itself. They watched the shadow on the window-shade. The shot, when it came, was an anti-climax. Mildred had expected a cannon's roaring blast. What she heard was more like the crunching of a peanut shell. The shadow slid down the shade and out of sight.

The man who'd crunched the shell came out of the house. He sauntered across the street. "Let's go."

Mildred was released. The man who'd held her gave her his lopsided smile. "Keep healthy, sister. Wait five minutes before sounding off." He followed his companion toward the corner bar.

Mildred waited until they'd rounded the corner before she beckoned. Ricky came out of the brownstone front and carried her bag across the street. She smiled, seeing his perplexed frown.

"They've gone," she said. "You're safe—but only till tomorrow. We're going to the airport now."

He said slowly, "Must have been a powerful line of double-talk you gave those guys. It isn't like them, giving up so easy."

"You're here, you're free. We're both free, darling! Stop worrying."

"I never worry. But here's another funny item. Somebody on

your floor is trigger-happy. I heard a shot. Sounded as if whoever fired it used a silencer."

"I heard it, too. So that's why it didn't make much noise! I was expecting a louder sound than that," she said.

"You were? You were expecting it? Give, baby. What's this all about?"

"A man was killed," she said. "A little man named Ollie. I don't think he minded very much. You see, he never lived. He wasn't like we are. He was just a lonely, unimportant man."

Ricky's grin was slow in coming, but it came. "You're a smart cookie, Beautiful. There's a taxi stand in the next block."

"We'll go there. We'll take a taxi to the airport and stick a pin in a map. That's where we'll fly to—or any other place you like. But you'd better give me the money first," she said.

"I don't want you to change your mind about taking me along." She put both hands on his shoulders, looked into his eyes. "You killed a bank robber today. His friends won't tell the police who did it but, if you forced me to, I would."

He said slowly, "I believe you would. It's just the sort of double-cross a smart operator like you would pull. A too-smart operator."

He slapped her hard three times. With his palm on her left cheek, with the back of his hand on her right, then flat-handed on the left again. *One . . . two . . . three . . . !*

"Get lost." After a moment, he added in amazement, "What the hell!"

He was no longer facing a smart operator, a fast-talking girl who could con a couple of hoods into killing the wrong man. She was a pathetic little creature who stared at him with horrified wide eyes. Her mouth hung open. From it came a single inarticulately spoken name.

"Ollie!"

She darted past him toward the neons of the bar.

"Where you going?" he caught her, whirled her around.

She jerked away. "Don't touch me—murderer! I'm going to call the police!" She turned and started to run.

He shot her in the back. The bullet plowed into the right auricle of her heart. She stood erect for a fraction of a second before collapsing. He looked at her body crumpled on the dirty gray cement.

"Goodbye, Beautiful."

The hour of the Blue Rose had ended. A siren sounded faintly as he walked away.



WE WERE parked less than a hundred yards from the jail, and it was just the set-up we needed.

Carl had driven around the town hall square until he'd found the small side street that commanded a full view of the front of the jail, but which allowed us to remain out of sight while we sat and waited. We'd been there for over an hour, sitting in the gathering darkness, and Carl hadn't said a word.

JAIL BREAK

The two men in the parked car were unobtrusive, relaxed, smoking patiently. But their hard glittering eyes pierced the muted peace of the Sunday evening and flicked nervously over the brick facade of the small town jail.

**BY
DAN SONTUP**

I looked over at him, sitting behind the wheel, his hat tipped back on his curly hair, his long fingers drumming lightly on the wheel. He was scowling.

I glanced at the jail, then turned to him and said, "How much longer, Carl? When do we move in?"

He didn't even bother to turn and look at me. He kept on scowling, staring straight ahead, and said, "I'll let you know when,

Jerry."

I shifted around on the front seat trying to stretch some of the kinks out of my legs, and stared at the jail again. There wasn't much to see, just a small town jail—a single-story red brick building set back from the street by a big green lawn. There was a light on in the front room of the jail, but the rest of it seemed to be in darkness.

I looked at Carl again and said, "You think we can pull it off? Can we get her out of there?"

He grunted.

"You figure out how we're going to do it?" I asked him.

He grunted again.

"Look, Carl," I said, "we can't get Lila out of there unless we have a plan first."

He turned to look at me then, his black eyes flat and without any expression. "You're pretty anxious to break my wife out of there, aren't you, Jerry?" he said.

I glanced at him quickly, but there was nothing showing on his face.

"Don't you want her out of there?" I said. "Don't you want Lila back with you?"

"Sure I do, Jerry," he said. "Sure I do."

"Then we got to have a plan," I told him.

He turned away from me and stared straight ahead at the jail. "Then let me worry about that," he said slowly. "Let me worry about my wife, Jerry."

There was still nothing showing on his face, and his voice was as flat as the expression in his eyes. I licked my lips and said, "I got to worry about it, too, Carl. All three of us are in this together."

He turned to me, and a slow smile twitched at the corners of his mouth. "Yeah," he said. "All three of us."

"Okay, then," I said. "How do we get her out of there?"

He took a deep breath and said, "Why do you want her out, Jerry?"

I stared at him. "Because the three of us were in that payroll job together."

"I didn't want her along," he said.

"But she's your wife, Carl. She wanted to come along. All she did was sit in the car and act as lookout."

He nodded his head. "Sure, a nice easy job for her so she could be near me—her husband."

"That's right," I said.

He smiled slightly again, then his face hardened. "If it was such an easy job, how come she got caught?"

"She got rattled, Carl. You know that."

"Sure. She got rattled when she saw a police car drive down the street. She got all upset and pulled out right in front of them and almost clipped their fender. She couldn't wait and see if they'd just drive by. She was sure they were coming for us, that someone had

turned in the alarm while we heisted the payroll."

I shrugged my shoulders and didn't answer him.

"So we come barreling out of the place," he said. "We come out with the payroll in our hands—and there she is being stopped by the police for pulling out in front of them."

"It's just one of the breaks, Carl," I said.

He snorted. "Was it just one of the breaks that she yelled out to us to keep on running? Couldn't she keep her mouth shut? The cops didn't know about the payroll job. She could have taken the traffic ticket they were going to give her and just keep her mouth shut and no one would have known about us. We could have beat it around the corner and made a clean get-away without the cops knowing that she was tied up with us."

"We made our getaway anyhow, Carl. We didn't get caught."

"Sure," he said. "We got away, but they got her because she opened her mouth and yelled. And now we got to break her out."

I shrugged my shoulders again. "We got to do it, Carl. We got no choice."

"Why?"

"Like I told you—the three of us were in on the job together. We can't leave her in there."

"That your only reason, Jerry?"

"Of course." I looked away from him.

And what's my reason, Jerry?

he said softly.

I turned back to him. "She's your wife."

He shook his head. "Forget about that," he said. "There's a better reason."

"What's that?"

"She's scared and rattled. I know my wife, Jerry. She's so upset at giving us away on the street that she'll clam up for the moment—just out of fright. She'll keep her mouth shut while she tries to figure out what to do next, but that won't last long. She'll crack—and then she'll tell them everything they want to know."

"I don't think Lila will do that," I said.

"Don't you, Jerry? We pulled the job on Friday morning. This is Sunday night. They've had almost three full days to work on her. She's just about ready to crack now. And once she does that, the cops will know all about you and me. Our names and old mug shots will be plastered on wanted posters all over the country. This way we've still got a chance. If I know Lila, she hasn't talked yet, and the cops don't know who we are."

"Okay," I said. "That still doesn't change the fact we got to get Lila out of there."

"I just wanted you to know my reasons, Jerry," he said quietly. "I already know yours."

I swallowed hard, but didn't answer him. I waited a moment, then said, "How do we do it?"

"I had my reasons for waiting till now," he said. "I know these small town jails. They're old and dirty and not too well guarded. On a Sunday night they usually have only one man in the place to look after things. Lila is probably the only real prisoner they got in there. The rest are drunks they picked up on Saturday night."

"You think it'll be that easy?" I said.

"It'd better be, Jerry. Just you hope that we can pull it off—and that my sweet little wife Lila hasn't cracked yet."

He looked at his watch, glanced out at the street and the jail, then said, "Let's go. It's time."

He started the car and pulled away from the curb and we drove slowly down the side street toward the jail. He made a wide turn in the square and parked the car right in front of the walk that cut through the green lawn to the jail door.

We got out of the car and Carl handed me the keys. "You drive when we come out," he said. "I'll ride in the back with Lila."

I took the keys from him, and we started up the walk. When we got to the door, I whispered, "How do we get in?"

Carl reached out and turned the doorknob and pushed lightly on the door. It was unlocked. He smiled grimly and said, "Small town jails."

He drew his gun and pushed

the door all the way open, and I pulled out my gun and followed right in back of him as he walked into the jail. He slammed the door shut behind us, and we were inside.

It was a small room, painted a dazzling white. Behind the desk against the far wall, an old man looked up at us, started to rise, then froze when he saw our guns.

Carl walked swiftly over to him and reached out and pulled the old man out from behind the desk. Carl jammed the gun in his ribs and said, "You the only one here, Pop?"

The old man bobbed his head up and down, his eyes wide, his mouth open.

Carl turned to me, the grim smile back on his lips. "I told you," he said. "Just one old man to guard the place."

I looked around me. Carl had been right so far, but this didn't look like an old and dirty jail to me. It was clean, and it looked real modern—especially the two solid steel doors set in one of the walls.

Carl saw me looking at the doors, and he said to the old man, "The cell blocks back there, Pop?"

The old man nodded his head. "Which one is the girl in?" Carl said.

The old man motioned to the door on his left. "The women's cells are there," he said in a high, squeaky voice.

"The keys, Pop," Carl said. "Let's have the keys."

The old man shook his head.

Carl grinned tightly and drew back his free hand and lashed out with it. The back of his hand caught the old man square on the face, and his head snapped back. Carl brought his hand around again, and his open palm got the old man on the other side of his face.

"The keys," Carl said in a low voice.

The old man looked at him for a moment, then motioned to the desk. "In the drawer," he said, his voice even more squeaky now.

Carl nodded to me, and I went over to the desk and opened the top drawer and found the keys. I took them out and went to the steel door on the left and tried a couple of keys before I found the one that fit. I turned the lock and opened the door carefully. It swung open easily and quietly on well-oiled hinges.

I could see a row of cells inside, but not much more than that because there was only one light on. I glanced over beside the door and found the light switch and flicked it on, and the whole cell block blazed with light.

There were five cells there. Two cells on either end were empty. In the middle one, Lila was stretched out on a bunk, blinking her eyes at the sudden glare of light.

I stepped back from the door and nodded to Carl. "She's in there," I said. "She's the only one there."

Carl grinned and said, "Go in and get her out of there." He held the gun on the old man while I went back to the cell block.

I walked quickly over to her cell, and Lila jumped off the bunk and ran over and grabbed at the bars. Her eyes opened wide and she said, "Jerry" in a soft and wondering voice.

I grinned at her and fumbled with the keys—and then I saw there was no lock on her cell door.

I stared at her helplessly, and she said, "It's electrically controlled. They have the main switch box down at the end of the cell block, and you have to work a set of levers to open the door."

"Do you know how they work the levers?" I said.

She shook her head.

"I'll be right back," I told her, and I went out to the office again.

Carl looked up at me, his gun still on the old man.

"It's an electric door," I said. "You got to work some levers to open it."

Carl nodded and turned back to the old man and said, "Okay, Pop. Let's get at them levers."

The old man stood still, his eyes on Carl's face.

"C'mon," Carl said. "I got no time to fool around with you."

The old man still didn't move. Carl stepped back from him and hefted the gun in his hand. He looked at me, then back at the old man, then suddenly raised the gun

and brought the barrel down in a raking blow across the old man's cheek.

Blood spurted out as the gun-sight ripped the old man's flesh, and his head moved with the force of the blow. He straightened his head up quickly, as though ashamed that it had moved, and stood there looking at Carl with the blood flowing down his face and neck and on to the collar of his shirt.

Carl smiled—slowly and raised the gun again. The old man didn't move, and I could see him tensing himself as the gun barrel came at him again. Carl got him on the other cheek this time, and the old man's head moved just a fraction of an inch, but he kept his lips clamped tightly shut and straightened up again.

Carl stared at him and said slowly, spacing every word carefully, "You're gonna open that door, old man, or I'm going to pistol whip you till you bleed to death right here."

The old man looked at him and said nothing, just stood there waiting.

I cleared my throat and said, "I'll go look at the levers. Maybe I can figure out how they work."

"Don't touch them," Carl said. "It might jam 'em up if you pull the wrong levers."

"I'll just look," I told him. "I won't touch them."

I backed out of the office as Carl

raised the gun again, and then I turned and went through the door to the cell block.

I heard the sound of the gun barrel hitting the old man's head as I glanced at the row of levers. It took only a moment to see that I wouldn't be able to figure them out. I went over to Lila's cell, and she looked at me, and I reached out and touched her hand where it was gripping the bars.

"Jerry," she said softly. "Is Carl out there?"

I nodded. "He's working the old man over so he'll open the door and let you out."

She bit her lip and I moved closer and reached my hand through the bars and touched her cheek.

She let her lips brush against my hand, then said, "Don't, Jerry. Carl might come in."

"It's all right," I told her. "He already knows about us."

Her eyes widened for a moment, then she said, "He's mean. He'll hurt both of us."

"It's all right," I said again. "I'm glad he knows. We'll settle things once we get you out of here. He won't hurt you. I promise you that."

She looked at me for a long moment and then her face went all soft and her eyes blinked and she tried to smile at me.

I reached out to touch her face again—and then I heard a shuffling sound in back of me and Carl's voice said, "Don't bother trying to

figure out the levers, Jerry."

I whirled around and Carl stood there in back of me, one hand holding the gun by his side, the other hand holding up the old man. The old man's face was almost completely covered with blood and his eyes stared at me glassily.

Lila gasped, and Carl looked at her and then at me and said, "Pop here is going to work the levers for us, aren't you, Pop?" He shook the old man, and the old man's head nodded up and down slowly.

Carl looked at Lila and me again and said slowly, "The three of us can settle our score later."

I licked my lips and said, "Okay. Later."

Carl nodded and then seemed to dismiss the whole thing from his mind. "Go out and get the car started, Jerry," he said. "Be ready to move as soon as Lila and I come out."

I looked at Lila, and her eyes told me it was all right. I started while Carl dragged the old man over to the levers.

I opened the front door of the jail and looked out. No one was in sight. I closed the door behind me and walked quickly to the car and got in. I fished the keys out of my pocket and had just turned the engine over when a loud bell began to clang from the jail.

I looked quickly at the jail. The front door was still closed and the bell was still clanging—and then two quick shots sounded from in-

side the jail.

I reached for the door handle, but before I could open it the jail door burst open and Carl came running down the walk. He yanked at the car door and jumped into the front seat next to me and shouted "Get going!"

I froze for a moment and he yelled over the sound of the bell, "The old fool set off the alarm by the levers. I had to gun him down."

I stared at him and said, "Lila . . ."

"Couldn't get her out. Couldn't work the levers." He glared wild-eyed at me, then yelled again, "Get going!"

I put the car in gear and we pulled away from the curb with the tires squealing as I pressed down hard on the gas pedal. The bell kept on clanging in back of us as I wheeled the car around the square and on to the main street of the town.

I drove almost automatically, still hearing the bell, and I turned corners and pushed the car down side streets not knowing where I was going until I suddenly realized that I couldn't hear the bell any more and then I slowed down just a bit and tried to see where we were.

"It's okay," Carl said. "We're on the road out of town."

I pushed down on the gas again and kept my eyes on the road while I tried to think, but it didn't do any good. I couldn't seem to get a straight thought started in my

head.

I kept on driving. We reached the foot of a steep hill, and Carl said, "Take the road up to the top, Jerry."

I turned into the road and drove up the winding road past houses with lights on and stretches of trees and then more houses. At the top of the hill, Carl said, "Okay. Stop here."

I pulled the car off the road into a clearing and cut the engine. I looked around us. There was a house about two hundred yards away and, down below, the entire town seemed to be spread out. I looked for the jail, but couldn't find it.

Carl shifted around on the seat to face me and said, "We split up here, Jerry."

I looked at him and he pointed with his gun to the railroad yards on the other side of the hill. "I'll grab a freight and get out before they block off the whole town."

I waited a moment and then said, "You don't want the car?"

He shook his head. "Too dangerous. They might have road blocks up by now. The freight is my best bet."

I stared at him, and my thinking was getting clearer now. And the more I thought, the tighter my throat seemed to get.

"What about Lila?" I said.

He shrugged his shoulders. "You can go back and get her if you want to."

"You don't care?" I said.

"Not any more, Jerry," he said, and then I knew.

"You're not worried about her talking, Carl?"

He shook his head.

"There were two shots from the jail," I said.

He nodded.

"One was for the old man," I said.

He nodded again.

"And you couldn't work the levers and get Lila out?"

"That's right, Jerry."

I thought about Lila and her lips brushing my hand and the way she had tried to smile at me. "I promised her you wouldn't hurt her," I said.

"She didn't feel any pain, Jerry. It was right between the eyes."

I looked at him, and he was grinning at me, a tight little grin that hardly split his lips.

He raised his gun and pointed it at me.

"And now you're going to make sure I don't talk," I said.

"That's right, Jerry."

I motioned with my head to the house near us. "They'll hear the shot," I said. "They'll call the cops."

"I don't need the gun," he said, and I saw his free hand fumbling in the pocket where I knew he kept his knife.

I yanked at the door handle and opened the door and let myself fall to the ground next to the car. I rolled over twice and got to my feet and started running for the trees,

pulling my gun out as I ran.

I heard Carl cursing in back of me, and then the car door slammed and I heard the engine roar.

He was starting the car, turning it around, and getting ready to head down the other side of the hill to the railroad yards.

I stopped and turned and raised my gun and snapped off a quick shot. I heard the bullet hit the side of the car and Carl cursed again and jammed on the brakes.

In back of us, someone opened a window of the house and yelled "What's going on out there?"

Carl opened the car door and leaned out, and I saw his hand come up with his gun in his fist and then the barrel spurted flame and something hot and hard and burning slammed into my leg.

I sank to the ground, and I heard Carl laugh. He slammed the car door shut and the tires squealed as he started forward—straight at me.

I rolled over and screamed out loud as the pain knifed through my leg. I was out of his way now, off the road, and I could see the car was going to roar right by me.

He was going to get away from

me. He was going to make it down the hill.

I raised myself on one elbow and took careful aim as the car roared by. I squeezed the trigger—and the whole rear end of the car burst into flame as my bullet tore into the gas tank.

The car lurched crazily and veered off the road, and the right fender crumpled into a tree, bringing the car to a stop.

The flames were all around the car now, and I could see Carl's face for just a split second at the car window. Then the flames roared up around his face and I couldn't see him any more.

Down below, in the town, I heard the fire sirens start, then the clanging of the bells as the engines pulled out, and I knew the burning car on top of the hill could be seen all over the town.

I tossed my gun away from me and pulled myself over until I could rest my back against a tree trunk.

I sat there and thought of Lila and watched the flames while the sirens and the bells came closer and closer.

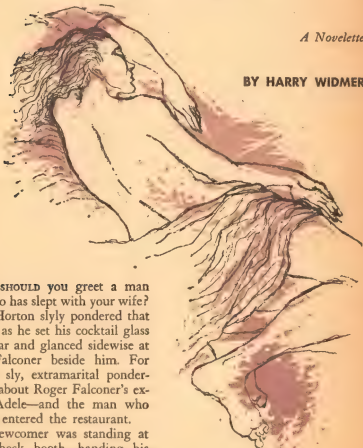


THE MODEL DIES NAKED

"How do you greet a man who has slept with your wife?" Curt pondered the question and took another sip of his martini.

A Novelette

BY HARRY WIDMER



HOW SHOULD you greet a man who has slept with your wife?

Curt Horton slyly pondered that question as he set his cocktail glass on the bar and glanced sidewise at Roger Falconer beside him. For Horton's sly, extramarital pondering was about Roger Falconer's exquisite Adele—and the man who had just entered the restaurant.

The newcomer was standing at the hatcheck booth, handing his homburg to Majel. Curt Horton had taken great pains to arrange

this "accidental" meeting between his boss, Roger Falconer—and the man with the homburg.

Roger Falconer was a tall, coldly handsome New Yorker, stamped with that indefinable brand of the quietly aggressive, top-flight executive. At the moment he was not looking toward the hatcheck booth and did not see the man with the homburg. But through the good-natured din of the business men packed around the bar, Falconer was aware of the low but penetrating timbre of Majel's voice as she called out one of her varied and cutting individual insults reserved for patrons:

"That tie looks like a tired chipie's tongue."

Roger Falconer chuckled. This was his first visit to the Steak Row luncheon rendezvous, affectionately dubbed the "Hog Wallow." Curt Horton had dragged him here today. Usually, Falconer had his lunch in the president's private dining room in the skyscraper offices of Universal Metal Cap. Roger Falconer was president and majority stock holder. But he was glad now that Curt Horton had brought him here. He'd never been in a luncheon bar like it.

Huge pitchers of extra-dry martinis loaded the bar. Everyone helped themselves from the pitchers. There was no bartender for the lunch period. The honor system worked on paying for the number of drinks a person consumed. If a

customer wanted something other than a martini he was obliged to go behind the bar and make it for himself.

Some women were at the bar, but the men seemed conscious only of Majel Moore at the hatcheck booth. And she wallowed in the distinction—in her strange, perverse and insulting way.

Majel was definitely quite a girl, thought Roger Falconer. She was stacked and packed, and fitted into Falconer's personal category of a sexy tart. When he had entered the restaurant and had given her his coat and hat, she had stood close to him, partly touching, and had raised her pert, sly and very wise face to his and said: "Hi, Cash McCall. I don't have to tell you *what* you need, do I?"

He had smiled at her then, strangely intrigued by her coarseness. And Curt Horton had laughed uproariously. Then the two men had made their way to the bar.

Now, Curt Horton had turned back to his martini, sipping, while watching the man of the homburg chatting with Majel. Then the man moved toward the bar. Just as he was about to pass, Horton casually turned and blocked his passage, saying heartily:

"Well, if it isn't Joe Beck!"

Falconer turned, saw the startled expression on Beck's face; then heard Horton's:

"Roger, surely you remember Joe Beck."

Roger Falconer noted fleetingly the tentative smile on Beck's face as if Beck were not quite sure of his reception. Falconer offered his hand.

Curt Horton *smiled again* as he thought: *How should you greet a man who has slept with your wife? You shake hands with him!*

Beck took Falconer's hand. "Been a long time, Roger."

"Four years. Korea. Last time I saw you was just after the business at Jane Russell Hill. You went Stateside."

Beck mumbled that that was so.

Falconer went on: "You never rejoined the outfit. Never wrote. Why, Joe?"

Curt Horton put in: "By the way, Joe, you must remember visiting Roger's wife on that leave—that's when I met you."

"Right," agreed Beck. "I transferred—about that time." He then spoke to Falconer. "My transfer, Roger—it's a long story. Rather personal, if you don't mind."

"Certainly, Joe. If I had known all this, I wouldn't have been so insistent about your dropping in on Adele at the time." Falconer smiled. "We'll forget it."

Curt Horton took Beck's arm. "Join us for lunch. A reunion—or something."

"By all means," Falconer urged.

Seated at their table with another round of martinis before them, Horton spoke to Beck. "I'll bet that

in Korea you never figured Roger to be a big-shot executive. I wanted a go at that Korean thing, but Roger saddled me with the business and went off to war. He's the boss!"

Falconer took a long swallow of his cocktail, then said: "Joe, as you know, Curt is my cousin, and he is more or less my partner—"

"Mostly less, Joe," put in Horton. "Listen to this, Joe, and judge for yourself. Roger is taking over a competitor—a big one. I have shown Roger how we can drop two thirds of the merging employees." Horton spread his hands in exasperation. "Oh, no! Roger won't hear of it. Roger Falconer is the big brother of the working man."

There was a tight silence which made Beck cast about in his mind for something to say. He came up with: "My business is rather minuscule beside your buying of vast industrial plants."

Curt Horton asked: "What is your line, Joe?"

"I'm a commercial photographer."

"Sounds interesting," murmured Falconer. "Have you any specialty?"

Beck took a gulp of his cocktail. "Cheesecake."

Horton chortled. "Damn fine work, I'll say!" He lowered his voice: "You should know Majel out there at the hatcheck booth. She poses—and I do mean *poses!*"

"Yes," said Beck, purposely ignoring Horton's emphasis. "I know.

Majel has posed for me. Her pictures are popular in the men's magazines."

Horton's smile said that he was sure this was so. He asked Beck: "Where are you located now?"

"Hotel Duchy." Then Beck snapped his fingers. "You mean my studio, of course. It's about four blocks from here. Lexington and Forty-seventh. The Bramler Building." He smiled. "You wouldn't have any business you could throw my way, would you?"

"Not cheesecake. But we are going to need pictures of the officials under the merger. Of course—if Roger approves."

Falconer nodded agreeably to Beck. "Sure, Joe. We'll want group pictures and portraits of the executives for use in trade papers and general release." Falconer turned to Horton. "That reminds me. We have that meeting tonight to intergrate management personnel of the two companies."

Curt Horton wagged his finger reprovingly at Falconer. "There you go again—leaving your beautiful wife alone at night." He turned his big smile to Beck. "I'll tell you, Joe, if I had a wife like Roger has, I wouldn't leave her home alone nights."

The turn of conversation annoyed Roger Falconer. He covered his feelings by saying to Horton: "The meeting starts at eight."

"When do we break it up, Roger?" As Horton spoke he cau-

tiously slid a glance over to Beck to see if he was alert to the question.

Beck was alert to it.

"Probably late," said Falconer. "Had you planned anything else for tonight? You did receive a memo on the meeting?"

"No and yes—in that order. I was merely curious. Now—let's get business out of our minds and talk about something pleasant while we eat." He then smiled at Beck. "It's hard to realize, Joe, but it's been four years since I met you. That was the night Adele brought you to my party." He slanted a glance toward Falconer. "While Roger was sitting in a Korean foxhole."

Beck was suddenly ill at ease.

Falconer did not notice this as he said: "That must have been some party. I believe Adele wrote me that she left early."

Beck fumbled with his cocktail glass.

Curt Horton murmured softly: "Some party."

Beck gulped the remainder of his drink. He stared into his empty glass, and then raised his head like a bird dog testing the wind. A waiter caught his look and moved toward the table. Beck asked Falconer: "Do you mind if I have another?"

"Me, too." Horton finished his martini.

"You two go ahead," said Falconer. "Four of these vicious things is more than my limit. I'll probably sleep all afternoon." He smiled at

Horton. "How do you do it, Curt?"

"Cast-iron gut, Roger. You should develop one."

Falconer took out his cigarette lighter as he saw Beck put a cigarette between his lips and pat his pockets for matches. Falconer passed his lighter over to Beck.

Beck nodded his thanks and got his cigarette going. When he saw that Falconer had his head bent over the menu, Beck placed the lighter on the table.

The lighter had a gray pearlized covering. It also had an inscription on its metal plate, reading: *Roger from Adele*. Adele had given the lighter to Roger when he had shipped out for Korea.

When the luncheon reached the coffee stage, Horton wasn't paying much attention to the conversation now going on between Falconer and Beck. They were discussing the photographic assignment to immortalize the combined executive staffs of the merging companies. Their talk drifted off in blurry vagueness in Horton's mind—and other words flashed across his brain in vivid clarity. These were words he had once put into a letter:

Dear Roger: It pains me to tell you this but it is a duty and an obligation that I do so. Adele and Beck left my party together at exactly ten after midnight. They went in Adele's car. . . .

These words lost their clarity as a voice dinned against Horton's

mind. With an effort, Horton brought himself back to the luncheon table—and Falconer and Beck.

Beck was saying for the second time: "I really must be taking off. Thank you for the luncheon Roger. Next time will be my treat."

Curt Horton said jovially: "We'll buy back our hats and coats from Majel."

Roger Falconer's cigarette lighter had disappeared from the table.

Out on the sidewalk in front of the restaurant, the nippy air hit them in gusts. They all said how good the air felt. Beck left first, after shaking hands with both, and saying he would walk to his office. Falconer's raised finger hooked a cruising cab which darted over to the curb.

Horton said: "You take the cab, Roger. I'm overdue on an important telephone call. I'll go back in and call."

Falconer grinned. "One more for the road, Curt?"

"No more for me, Roger. Honor bright. See you at the office shortly."

As the cab pulled away, Horton retraced his steps back into the Hog Wallow.

That night at ten o'clock Curt Horton gazed thoughtfully across the wide expanse of apple-green wall-to-wall carpeting in his immense office on the top floor of the Universal Building. He was in this contemplative mood when the door

was suddenly thrust open and Roger Falconer strode in.

Falconer said shortly: "Look here, Curt, you've been talking to our execs, and they are filled up to the ears with seniority and prerogative. This merger has got to be a halfway meeting for all concerned. If our people don't stop acting like a bunch of idiots, I'm going to get damned tough. I'm—"

Horton said soothingly: "Roger, let's break up this meeting. We're getting nowhere. I promise to keep my mouth shut and go along with whatever you decide. Let's break it up now, and set another meeting for—say, early in the week. Meanwhile, I won't try to influence any of our people. A promise, Roger. Okay?"

Falconer looked strangely at Horton. Horton had always been the one to argue out a meeting to its bitter end. Falconer finally nodded. "All right, Curt. But your switch does surprise me. I'll adjourn the meeting."

"Do that." Horton smiled. "And kiss the boys good-night for me. Then, Roger, you're letting me drive you home. You're a tired man."

"Why, thanks." Falconer remembered his efforts to keep his eyes open during the meeting. Those unaccustomed martinis for lunch were telling now. . . .

When they pulled up in front of Falconer's home on East Sixty-third he was nodding. His home was a

remodeled brownstone painted white, fitted with long, narrow white shutters and graced with an iron lacework balcony effect in the New Orleans manner.

Horton said: "Here you are, Roger. I don't know how you feel, but I certainly could cope with a nightcap right now." Then he looked quickly at Falconer, remonstrating: "Oh, I didn't mean to be presumptuous in inviting myself in—"

Falconer's ingrained good manners made him say: "By all means—come in. I guess I could do with a pickup myself." He looked up and down the dark street, then pointed. "There's a place to park across the street near the light."

The high front steps of the usual brownstone had been taken off Falconer's house, and the ground-level door had been made into the main entrance, fitted with a solid, metal-studded oak panel. Falconer keyed his way into a large foyer lined with wardrobe closets. On his way to one of these closets, he stopped.

He stared at a homburg and a coat placed over a chair.

Horton appeared not to notice the strange hat and coat.

Falconer hung Horton's hat and coat, then his own. His glance went back to the homburg. Falconer was puzzled. The hat was familiar, and, again, it wasn't. He was vaguely disturbed and didn't know why. But he did know for sure that he was sorry he'd asked Horton in.

They went up the thickly carpeted staircase that lay against the left-hand wall of the foyer. On the second floor, the stairwell parapet was a four-foot-high bank of bookshelves that screened the stairwell from the living room. The living room was a huge, high-ceilinged work of decorator's art.

Falconer, coming up level with the living-room floor, had no eye for the room's distinguishing beauty which on all other occasions had never failed to give him a warm glow. Instead, he had eyes only for the two people sitting across the room on a divan; with highballs, whiskey decanter and ice bowl before them.

The couple on the divan were close together, talking, and so interested in one another that they took no notice of Falconer and Horton standing at the head of the staircase.

Falconer instantly recognized Joe Beck, and now realized why the homburg downstairs had looked so familiar. Then Falconer looked at Adele.

She was a slender, lovely girl; her straight back and the curve of her haunches were lines of pure beauty. She was wearing a new hostess gown he had never seen before. And, as with all her hostess gowns, he wondered what she was wearing beneath it. The answer to that exciting question, as he had often discovered to his delight, was—nothing. Her animated, smiling face

was turned to Beck, listening interestedly to what he was saying in a low tone.

Then she laughed softly and inclined her head toward his shoulder, not quite touching it and then raising her face to his to look into his eyes. Falconer recognized that mannerism of Adele's. He had always thought that it was for him alone, and he was startled to see that another man shared that intimate little gesture.

Horton, standing quietly beside Falconer, suddenly gave a wolf whistle.

Adele and Beck raised their heads, startled. Beck's face flushed when he saw Falconer and Horton standing there, looking at him. Beck got quickly to his feet, saying: "Why, hello there, Roger . . . Curt."

Adele rose lithely and walked across the wide room to Falconer. Her lips parted in a welcoming smile. "How nice that you're home early, Roger." She kissed his mouth.

Falconer slipped his arm around her waist. His fingers felt the satin hostess gown slide over her bare flesh beneath it. He drew his mouth from her lips and looked down into her eyes. Then his hand moved lower over the hostess gown. His fingers touched her garter belt.

Though her eyes still held his, Falconer sensed a withdrawal in hers—that she was aware of his seeking fingers and what they were trying to learn . . . and the signifi-

cance he was attaching to his findings. Falconer couldn't determine what was going on in her eyes, but she was setting up screens in their depths and shutting him out. He felt a cold, hard lump settling in the pit of his stomach.

Beck was uncomfortable in the taut silence which had settled over the room. He cleared his throat. "Just dropped by to say, hello."

Falconer nodded. "Hello, Joe."

Horton unbuttoned his jacket, thrust his hands into his trouser pockets and rocked back on his heels. He wagged his finger playfully at Beck. "It escapes me, Joe, but did Roger say at lunch that he would be working late tonight?"

Roger Falconer knew that he had said so.

Adele's eyes darted to Curt Horton. Her expression indicated that she found nothing playful in his question. And Horton saw anxiety in her eyes. He slowly dropped one eyelid in a deliberate wink to her. Adele quickly averted her face. She spoke to her husband.

"Joe phoned and told me that he had run into you and Curt at lunch today. I asked him to drop over for a drink and wait for you."

Falconer was uneasily aware of undercurrents that had suddenly transformed these three people into strangers. He put a cigarette between his lips and absently reached for his lighter.

Horton struck a match and lighted Falconer's cigarette. Then Hor-

ton glanced over his shoulder to Adele and said: "I'm glad Joe's here. I didn't get much of a chance to know him at my party four years ago." He whistled softly. "That was *some* party. . . . Wasn't it, Adele?"

Adele clutched her glass more firmly. Her face whitened. "Yes."

Roger Falconer was watching his wife.

Adele's eyes did not meet her husband's. She turned to Beck. "Let me make you another drink, Joe. And one for Roger and Curt. I'm sure that is what Curt dropped in for."

"Brrrrr!" Horton shuddered. "Chilly around here."

Joe Beck took Adele's hand and held it. "No thank you. I really must be moving on. Thank you again, Adele, for everything." He reluctantly freed her hand, and turned to the men. "Good night, Roger. . . . Curt."

Falconer said: "Let's have lunch again, Joe. Maybe you'll feel more up to telling me about your transfer from the Korean outfit."

"Maybe I will, Roger. I'll call you—soon." Beck nodded to Adele and walked across the room toward the staircase.

Falconer went over to the whiskey decanter. "Will have your drink in a moment, Curt."

Horton shook his head and smiled. "Changed my mind, Roger old boy. Thanks just the same, Adele." He walked in Beck's wake. When Horton reached the top of

the staircase, he wagged a finger at Falconer and chuckled. "Poppa should stay home at night." Then he raised his voice and called down to Beck who was putting on his coat in the foyer below: "I'll drop you off, Joe. I have my car at the door." He disappeared into the stairwell.

Moments later, the downstairs door closed.

Falconer hadn't moved; just stood there, looking at Adele. Now, she returned his gaze, saying nothing. Falconer asked her quietly:

"Adele, have you been seeing Joe Beck?"

"No," she said, "I have not. I haven't seen him in four years." She brushed a hand across her forehead. "Roger, I'm suddenly all done in. That vulgar Curt is too much for me. I'm going to bed."

"It seems that we have something to talk about, Adele." He looked at his wife in her new hostess gown, standing before him more lovely than he had ever seen her.

Adele shook her head. "No, Roger—we have nothing to talk about. You have just said everything that had to be said. And your hand feeling my body to discover what I was wearing under my gown. Were you expecting me to be naked underneath—for Joe?"

Falconer felt a knot tightening in his stomach, an ice-cold knot that burned with its freezing intensity. He said thickly: "You knew he was coming. You wore this."

Adele made a hopeless gesture with her hands. "There's nothing I can really say, is there?"

The burning knot in Falconer's middle climbed to his brain. Joe Beck had definitely known that he wouldn't be home. Adele knew that Beck was coming to see her, and she didn't bother to dress. Falconer's fists clenched, and his face set in rocklike lines.

Adele stared at him, frightened. Falconer turned and ran down the stairs.

Adele called after him: "Roger. . . . Roger—don't!"

He shut his ears to her as he grabbed his hat and coat. Then he went out into the street, looking for a cab. As usual, there weren't any on East Sixty-third. He walked swiftly toward Madison Avenue which was a better bet for cabs at this hour than Park Avenue. He whistled to a cab and got in, saying:

"Hotel Duchy."

The ride downtown was a blur of passing lights. One question hammered at his brain: Had Adele and Beck made love that night four years ago? Falconer tore the shocking thought from his conscious mind and forcibly pushed it down deep into his subconscious—where it would do greater harm.

The cab had stopped and the driver leaned back. "Hotel Duchy, sir."

Falconer gave the cabbie a dollar, and, getting out of the car, strode through the revolving door

and went up to the desk clerk.

The Duchy was a small, side-street hotel. There was a long corridor before emerging into the box-like lobby. Falconer asked the clerk: "Is Mr. Beck in his room?"

"I just saw him go into the bar with another gentleman." The clerk pointed to Falconer's right. "Over there, sir."

Falconer went into the cocktail lounge. At this hour it was not crowded, and he had no trouble in immediately picking out Beck and Horton standing at the bar. Beck had his head bowed, listening to something Horton was saying.

Then Falconer was standing in front of Beck. Beck glanced up and saw the wicked anger in Falconer's eyes. Beck stood frozen, seemingly incapable of movement or speech.

Falconer said: "Thanks, pal—for everything." Then he swung a beautifully timed punch. There was the meaty smack of a butcher slapping a bony slab of meat on the chopping block. Beck weaved, his legs crossed and his shoulder dug into the floor. Then he flattened out and didn't move.

Falconer looked at Horton as if weighing the pleasure of giving him similar treatment. He decided against it, turned on his heel and left the lounge.

The bartender seized the bar to vault over it and follow Falconer, but Horton grabbed his arm, saying:

"It's a family matter. I'm keeping out of it, too." He beckoned the bartender closer, confidentially. "That big chap is my boss, the head of Universal Metal Cap. I don't cross him!" Horton slipped a twenty into the bartender's hand. "The boss has wife trouble."

The bartender looked down at Beck on the floor. "No broad is worth a crack on the kisser like he got."

Horton also looked down at Beck, thinking: *How should you greet a man who has slept with your wife? . . . You sock him on the jaw!*

Horton bent down and helped Beck to his wobbly feet. He led him over to one of the unoccupied tables against the wall. Then Horton signaled for drinks, ignoring the excitement caused by the knock-down. He closed his mind to everything except some thoughts of his own. And through his mind ran the words:

They went in Adele's car. They drove straight to Adele's home—your home—and she let them in with her key. I know this to be true because I followed them in my car. Because of my loyalty to you, Roger, I sat in my car all night in front of your house. . . .

Beck mumbled groggily, interrupting Horton's thoughts. Horton pushed a highball closer to Beck, saying: "Well, what the hell did you expect?"

The next night Falconer left his office and walked up Lexington Avenue and turned east onto 45th Street to the door of the Hog Wallow. The time was five thirty-five.

Majel, sleek and tall, welcomed him with a husky: "Hello, man."

"Hello," said Falconer. He couldn't help noticing her dress, and appreciating the major problem it was having in keeping her within its confines. "Yesterday, I misplaced my cigarette lighter. Mr. Horton suggested that I drop by and inquire if you've come across one."

Majel moved closer, making sure that her perfume, warmed by her flesh, got through to him. She nodded toward the bar. "Why don't you have Vince make you a drink while I check on the lighter." She stepped behind him and put her hands on his shoulders.

Falconer unbuttoned his coat, though he hadn't expected to remove it. When he took the hatcheck from Majel, he said: "Hadn't I better describe the lighter?"

Majel's eyes were inscrutable in a deadpan face. "Yes."

He described the lighter, then asked: "May I send a drink over to you?"

Majel's eyes warmed again. "Scotch on the rocks, please. Thank you, Mr. Falconer." Before he could react to her knowing his name, she turned her back and smoothly moved into her little hatcheck booth. Falconer's eyes followed her, as she knew they would.

Over at the bar, Falconer found elbow room, and told the busy Vince: "Scotch on the rocks for Majel. Same for me, here."

The bar was just as crowded as at noon yesterday. But now there was less of an atmosphere of casual enjoyment. The mood seemed to be more hurried with something quietly desperate about downing drinks while constantly checking the clock against Grand Central train schedules.

While waiting for his drink, Falconer's mind drifted to Curt Horton. For Curt, surprisingly, had not once during the day mentioned a word about last night; not even the knockdown in the Hotel Duchy bar. And there had been no word from Beck.

Falconer was served his scotch on the rocks. His mind slipped back to last night.

Adele had locked him out of her bedroom.

This morning, the housekeeper had made his lonely breakfast. . . .

Falconer suddenly found Majel at his elbow. She had courageously worked her way into the press of men at his side. Her back was toward a red-faced man. The red-faced man's arm moved. Majel jumped slightly, then grinned over her shoulder at the man. Turning again to Falconer, she laid her long-fingered hand on his arm.

"No good word as yet about the lighter, Mr. Falconer. I have checked Henri, and Vince at the

bar, and now I'm checking the waiters." Her fingers tightened on his arm. Her eyes went slowly over his fine tailored suit, custom shirt and expensive necktie. "You're cool and sweet, man. Stay planted here. I'll dig some more." Then she moved away, brushing snugly against him.

Falconer took a gulp of his scotch.

Then, above the conversation at the bar, he heard Majel welcome some newcomer: "Nice shirt, Maxie. It matches your purple snout."

Falconer found that he was continually aware of Majel's presence. She was sly, knowing and hard—but she, perversely, attracted him. Totally different than Adele. Or was she?

Adele!

Four times today he had tried to reach Adele by phone. The housekeeper's answer had been that Mrs. Falconer had left the house in the morning and had not returned. So, instead of facing a probable lonely dinner at home, Falconer had decided to take Curt Horton's advice to stop by the Hog Wallow and ask about the missing lighter.

About three scotches later, Falconer again found Majel at his side. Most of the commuting men had cleared out, but there was still a sizable crowd at the bar.

Majel said: "No luck as yet. Still trying. I'll—"

A bellow from a departing customer at the hatcheck booth caused Majel to turn. She said quickly to

Falconer: "You can send over another, if you care to." Then she swished off on her spikes; a tall girl, sure of herself and sure of the men around her.

Falconer sent a drink over to her and ordered another for himself. He tried to tie down some fleeting impression he had about Majel—and it suddenly occurred to him that she was still insulting the patrons, as she had yesterday. Everyone—except him. And she had known his name, tonight.

Falconer thought about this as he worked on his drink. He glanced at his wrist-watch, and was surprised to see that the time was near seven. He was just beginning to feel a little fuzziness from his drinks, and decided that it was time to get a good dinner under his belt. He also felt that this was as good a place as any to have the dinner, especially as he had caught a whiff of a charcoal broiled steak. He said to the bartender:

"Another for Majel. And send one to my table. And let me know the damages, Vince."

As he settled up at the bar and turned toward the dining room, he looked over at Majel's booth. She was now sitting in front of the booth and she had crossed her careless, beautiful legs. She raised her new drink to him and winked.

Falconer winked back.

In the dining room, Henri pulled back the chair, asking: "Steak or chicken, sir?"

"Steak, medium rare."

When Falconer finished his steak, he looked up from the empty plate of glorious memory and saw Majel walking toward his table. Falconer had a decision to make, and he knew its consequences. The decision would be made simply by how he greeted Majel. She was obviously coming to make a final report about his missing lighter. He could remain seated while receiving her information, and thank her; his thanks being a dismissal, perhaps with a folded bill for her trouble.

He saw that Majel was not in her working clothes of black. She was now wearing a lime-colored dress that must have been sprayed on her amazing body with a loving airbrush. Instead of her usual black spikes, she now wore still higher spikes on burgundy-colored shoes. Her lustrous hair was freshly combed and shone beautifully. Her makeup was dramatically stimulating. She wore no hat, and carried a mink over one arm.

Falconer instantly rose from his chair. That was his decision.

Majel slipped her hand into his. "I'm terribly sorry, Mr. Falconer, about your lighter. I have checked everywhere; all the waiters. We pulled soiled linen out of laundry bags. I'm sorry, but your lighter is just not here."

Falconer pressed both of his hands around her fingers. "You went to a great deal of trouble. I am very grateful." Again, he was aware

of the spicy perfume rising from the warmth of her breasts. "Won't you join me in a cordial?"

Majel smiled wryly. "You've been feeding me drinks all evening. I have a nice edge." She leaned against him for a fleeting second. "Yes. A cordial will hone the edge. Thank you."

Falconer drew out a chair for her. Then he draped the mink over another chair. The mink was a good one.

One green chartreuse was followed by a second. While Falconer and Majel were sipping their third, Majel leaned across the table and lightly squeezed his hand. "Roger—" it was now Roger—"you look sort of done in. How's about coming over to my place? We can have a few quiet drinks together—away from noise and people."

Falconer's share of ego was tempered by realism. Majel's invitation to special treatment was welcome—but there had to be a catch somewhere. He signaled the waiter for the bill, then smiled at Majel, resisting the temptation to tickle her palm, and said: "A few quiet drinks together sounds great."

Inside the door of Majel's apartment, Majel turned and lightly kissed one side of his mouth. Her voice was barely audible: "Welcome, Roger." She stepped back away from him, tossed her mink over a chair and took his hat and coat. "My holiday," she grinned.

Falconer looked around her East 85th Street apartment. Periods were mixed pleasingly and colorfully. The upholstery and rug were new and expensive. Majel conducted a tour.

The apartment had a large living room; good-sized bedroom with a Malibou bed; bright bathroom and a neat, tiny kitchen.

Majel pursed her full lips and looked sidewise at Falconer. His eyes were not hungrily following her every step as did the eyes of all the other men she had brought here. He made no leading remarks in the direction of the bedroom. And he made no attempt to fondle her. Majel was—intrigued.

She put her hands on his shoulders and eased him into a chair. "You and Mr. Horton are in the same firm, aren't you? Or rather, you are the boss. Right?"

"Something like that," agreed Falconer. "We are partners. Our fathers were partners. Family affair, sort of. But—I'm sorry. You couldn't possibly be interested in this."

"Oh, but I am." She stood in front of him; tall and incredibly sensuous in her lime dress and burgundy spikes. "You've no idea, really." She casually leaned forward toward him. "I love business—and men who make a success of it."

Falconer looked carefully at her. "I rather had the impression that you merely tolerated us, as a means to an end."

"An end?" Majel was cautious.

"To speak frankly, your calculated insults must stem from a deep antagonism."

Majel laughed softly. "Those insults! Dear lad, believe me, it's a gimmick to stimulate trade. But—tell me about your fathers, yours and Curt's. I'm very interested."

"Very well, but do sit down."

"A drink first. Are you still partial to scotch?"

Falconer nodded his thanks. Majel turned on one spike and swayed gently across the room toward the kitchen. This time, Falconer did watch her gently rolling and clenching gait. Majel must have been aware of his eyes; for she put genuine artistry into it.

She quickly returned with the drinks, gave one to Falconer and sat in a chair opposite him. She eased down with the sinuous grace of a lithe jungle creature. She crossed her legs, not boldly but in a definitely liberal mood.

Falconer took a drink of his scotch and said: "Well, then: Curt's father had Universal Metal Cap, and he was in bad straits. Dad bought the controlling interest. Curt's father died first. Then Dad."

"And you," said Majel in a low voice, "inherited your father's stock and control." Majel chewed briefly on her under lip. She could readily see that this line of conversation was getting her nowhere, as far as Roger Falconer was concerned. To her, he seemed indrawn and perhaps watchful. Majel thought that she

had a remedy for that. "You may not know, Roger—but I have a sideline. Would you be interested in seeing what I do?"

Falconer remembered Beck saying that Majel had posed for pictures. "Yes, I would."

Majel went to a table drawer and took out a sheaf of photographs. She handed them to Falconer, saying: "I'm a cheesecake model. You look at these while I make a snack."

Falconer laid the sheaf of photographs in his lap and slowly went through them, taking the top one off and placing it on an end table. The pictures showed Majel adorned with fluffs of gauze, scanty play suits or bikinis or a not-too-large towel. What they all showed was that Majel had the most magnificent body he had ever seen. Then he suddenly came upon a photograph that was not in this cheesecake category. It had a category of its own, but it was not publishable cheesecake.

Majel returned with a tray of hors d'oeuvres. She whistled when she saw the picture Falconer was looking at. "Say! That one shouldn't have gotten in with the others." But she made no attempt to take it from his lap.

Falconer couldn't take his eyes from the picture. He felt that if he touched it, it would burn his fingers. One part of his mind sat back and speculated on the thought that Beck might have taken this picture.

Majel asked softly: "You like it?"

She had a sly, gently mocking smile on her lips. She leaned down to him, lifted the picture from his lap. Her other hand pulled back his coat lapel, and she slipped the picture into his inside jacket pocket. "For you, darling."

He pulled her down into his lap, looked for a long moment into her eyes, then slowly kissed her. Majel held her left arm behind Falconer's head and she turned her wrist-watch so that she could see that the time was five minutes to ten. Then she felt his hands. She closed her eyes and worked on the kiss.

Falconer, strangely enough, found himself thinking of Adele. He was surprised that he didn't feel like a heel. If there was a moral to all this, he decided, it had something to do with a wife locking her husband out of her bedroom.

When Majel again looked at her wrist-watch the hands said ten thirty. Her wrist-watch had taken on a more or less important aspect as an item of dress. It was all she was wearing. She was seated, rather sprawlily, at the head of her outsize bed.

Falconer noted with some amusement that her position was identical with that of the photograph which rested in his coat pocket. The coat now hung on the back of a chair in Majel's bedroom. His trousers were neatly folded on the seat of the chair.

He allowed a vagrant thought to

enter his mind: sometime, somewhere he would be with a woman—and his clothes would be scattered on the floor where he would have feverishly dropped them. Sometime. . . .

He was lounging across the foot of the bed, his hands clasped behind his head, and his face turned toward Majel. He asked:

"What's it all about, Majel?"

She cocked her head to one side. "I dance—but I don't follow you."

"I mean—your interest in me."

Her mouth curved into a smile. "You looking for a compliment?"

Falconer shook his head. "Just tell me—why *me*."

Her smile grew wider. "Surely you're not a minus man?"

He got up on one elbow, spoke slowly. "You insulted every man at the bar tonight—but not me. I got special treatment. And you knew my name. How did you learn my name?"

"That's easy, darling. When Mr. Horton came back into the bar yesterday to make a phone call I asked him your name. You see, darling, I was the huntress from the start. A girl has a better instinct than a man for things like this."

While Falconer was digesting this biological tidbit, the telephone rang. Majel rolled over and stretched for the white-enameled extension on her night table. Her back was now to Falconer. She spoke into the phone.

"Yes?"

She was silent, listening. Then: "No, Vince, I'm sure it wasn't a pipe lighter." She looked at Falconer, and he shook his head. "Anyway, we can check it out tomorrow. Mr. Falconer was here," she winked at Falconer, "but he left about a half hour ago." Majel listened again, then laughed. A moment later, she said, "S'long," and broke the connection.

Majel stretched again and set the phone in its cradle. She looked over her shoulder, smiling at Falconer. "I'm glad that you are really still here."

"So am I. But I should be on my way. I've got a full day at the office tomorrow."

"But it's early, Roger. The night is young. Besides—we've only scratched the surface."

Falconer started to laugh, and his laughter turned into a howl.

"Fresh!" She flicked out her bare foot and sent him rolling off the foot of the bed to land on the floor. Then her boisterous laughter followed him. She slithered across the bed and looked down at him.

He grinned up at her face showing over the foot of the bed. "Give me a raincheck, Majel." He spread his arms in a remonstrating gesture. "I have my business to look after. Make it a Friday or Saturday night, and we'll pull out all the stops."

Majel's head disappeared, so he couldn't see what expression had crossed her face. Then she nimbly sprang to her feet and stood look-

ing down at him. "As you wish, darling. But before you go—a stirrup cup." She turned and padded off into the living room and then into the kitchen.

From his position on the floor, his eyes followed her. Stirred again, he quickly got to his feet and silently followed her. In the living room his eye caught a flash of her body in the small crack made by the partially opened kitchen door and the jamb on the living-room wall. He could see the top of a kitchen table; two glasses, Majel's two hands and the tip of one breast. The peepshow novelty intrigued him. He watched.

One of Majel's hands disappeared and reappeared holding a tiny bottle. Her fingers took out the cork and poured into one of the glasses.

Falconer softly made his way back into the bedroom. Now, things were beginning to add up. The course of the whole evening was now taking shape.

When Majel padded into the bedroom with a glass in each hand, she saw that Falconer had dressed to the extent of trousers, socks and shoes.

Falconer came toward her and took the glass she offered. Her right-hand glass. He had maneuvered her so that the backs of her knees were almost against the edge of the bed. He gave her a playful shove and she sat down on the bed, her hand spilling her drink.

"Quit it!" she yelled angrily.

He put one knee on the bed, and with his left hand quickly closed her nostrils and tilted back her head. Her mouth flapped open in automatic reaction to get air. Falconer poured the doped drink into her open mouth. Then he dropped the glass and clapped his right hand over her mouth. Her mouth and nose covered, Majel swallowed involuntarily.

She became a whipping, straining tigress. Falconer put his other knee across her thighs to anchor her. Then his left hand released her nose and clamped like a steel vise around her flailing arms. Black venom glittered in her eyes. She tried to bite him, but his fingers were too strong and held her jaw clamped shut.

Majel must have prepared a big dose; for the drug soon started to take effect. He just held her until she wilted back on the bed. Quickly releasing her mouth he pinched her. Majel's lack of reaction to where she had been pinched told him definitely that she was out.

Falconer covered her with a sheet. He finished dressing, his mind trying to grapple with the meaning of what had happened. In the jumble of mental pictures wildly flashing across his brain, one single thought stood out sharp and clear. If he hadn't seen Majel in the kitchen he now would be out cold on that bed—and Majel would be phoning someone of the success of her prearranged plan. A perfect

setup for a photographer—or a visit by a divorce-seeking wife . . . or both.

Falconer picked up the two glasses, took them into the kitchen, washed and dried them and put them away, holding them in a towel.

He then let himself out of Majel's apartment into the quiet corridor. He closed the door, making sure it was locked. Instead of risking meeting someone in the self-service elevator, he walked down the stairs to the entrance hall. He paused suddenly on the stairs when he heard footsteps crossing the marble foyer toward the elevator. When the elevator door closed and the mechanism started humming, he stepped out into the foyer and swiftly made his way to the front door.

Falconer walked away from Majel's apartment building, turning west. The night had gotten colder, and the wind had an icy nip. As a general rule he enjoyed walking in bracing weather. But with his recent activities and the liquor dying in him he felt the cold. When he reached the intersection at York Avenue he was hit with a blustery north wind howling down the concrete canyon. A rancid pink neon beckoned him to a tavern.

There were about a dozen men perched on stools at the long bar. All had bottles of German beer in front of them. Falconer was not much of a beer drinker. When he ordered scotch, several of the near-

est drinkers turned and looked at him, then went back to their beers without change of expression.

Falconer took one scotch, called for another, then went into a phone booth at the rear of the bar. He sat in the booth, listening to the ringing at the other end of the line. Adele was either out or not answering the phone. The housekeeper left at about eight. He hung up and dialed again. After listening to ten rings, he gave it up.

He stepped out of the booth and thumbed through the Manhattan phone book for the number of the Hotel Duchy. He dialed the number, and looked at his wrist-watch. Eleven.

When the call was routed through the hotel switchboard, Beck's voice said: "Hello?"

"Joe. This is Roger. No doubt you are surprised to hear from me. I just wanted to ask you—"

Beck interrupted: "Hold on a moment, Roger. Someone's at the door. He withdrew from the phone and called out: "It's open—push hard." Then he came back to the phone, saying: "It's Curt, Roger." Then, off-phone: "Huh? All right." Back into the phone: "Roger, Curt wants to speak to you."

Curt Horton's voice came on: "Roger! Is that you?"

"Judge for yourself," said Falconer, curious at Horton's tone.

There was a perceptible pause, then Horton's voice got cozy: "Having yourself a time, Roger?"

"Nothing but. I'm here alone at a bar."

"The hell you are."

"Come over and join me, and tell me what you are doing at Joe Beck's place."

"To be perfectly honest with you, Roger, I am doing a little missionary work. I was going to impress on Joe that he was endangering your home life."

"Your concern is touching, Curt. Now, why don't you get out and get swacked and mind your own damned business. Before you go, though, put Joe back on the line."

Joe Beck's voice asked: "You started to say, Roger. . . ."

"I just wanted to ask you if you had been planning to take some pictures tonight."

"No, I was not."

"You're a lousy liar, Joe." Falconer hung up the receiver. He held himself in tight check. If he went over to Beck's place now he knew that he would do more than punch his jaw.

Falconer went back to the bar and made himself sit quietly on one of the stools. He tried to think dispassionately. He told himself that if he approached this dilemma in the proscribed steps of problem analysis he could break it down. But, somehow, Majel and Adele did not fit into the neat graphs of executive management. Three more scotches in forty-five minutes conclusively proved this. He finally decided to go back to Majel, wake her

up and bat the truth out of her. . . .

He was surprised to find the door of Majel's apartment open a crack. No sound came from within. He nudged open the door and walked into the living room. The lights were burning as when he had left an hour earlier. The kitchen light was still on, and the softly glowing one in the bedroom. He walked into the bedroom and saw that Majel had kicked off the sheet. One pillow lay against her cheek.

As he neared the bed he saw that her magnificent chest was not moving. He bent over, put an ear to her chest, listening for a heartbeat. There was no heartbeat. He took off his glove, held her wrist. There was no pulse. Drawing back on his glove, he went over to her vanity and picked up a hand mirror. This he held a fraction of an inch from Majel's mouth and nose. No vapor fogged the mirror.

Falconer straightened up. He knew that Majel had been smothered with the pillow while she lay in a drugged sleep. He remembered how alive those arms and thighs had been. Piercing through his shock came a vengeful viciousness he had never known before. Death and violence in Korea had struck savagely at him, but nothing had had the same brutal impact as this waste of a lovely body.

He walked slowly to the door of the bedroom, thinking of the police and photographers who would

eventually crowd into this room. Somehow, Falconer didn't want them to find her exposed as her murderer had left her. The last and decent service he could accord her was to cover her with the sheet.

He went back into the room, and took the sheet in his hand and flipped it up over her. He was vaguely conscious of something hitting against his shoe. His looking down was a natural reflex action.

He saw the cigarette lighter on the floor; partly under the bed. He picked it up. An icy hand gripped his vitals when he read the inscription: *Roger from Adele*. . . .

Falconer went into a different tavern this time. While waiting for his drink, he noticed on the back-bar a card displaying cellophane bags of salted nuts. He bought one. Quickly finishing his drink, he consulted the telephone directory. He popped a handful of nuts into his mouth, and folded himself into the phone booth. He dialed Police Headquarters. When the connection was made, he spoke through the mouth full of nuts. "There is a dead woman in Apartment Five F, at Ten twenty-five East Eighty-fifth Street." He hung up and left the tavern. He had a three-block walk downtown in the cold, blustery wind before he caught a cab.

The lobby of the Hotel Duchy was practically empty when Falconer strode toward the desk. Some

of the lights had been turned out. The semi-darkness cut harsh shadows on his face. At the desk, he asked:

What is the number of Mr. Beck's room?"

The night clerk, smoothly shaved and slicked with pomade, said: "I believe that Mr. Beck has checked out. Just a moment, please." He stepped into the cashier's cage and consulted some papers. "Yes, he did. About an hour ago."

"Any forwarding address?"

"None, sir."

Falconer turned from the desk. His head was roaring. Had Beck taken Adele with him? Falconer ran into the street, looking for another taxi. . . .

When this cab finally drew up in front of his home, Falconer saw lights on in the living room on the second floor—which could mean anything or nothing. He put his key into the door and entered the foyer. Rapidly he climbed the stairs. As he reached the top and looked into the living room he saw Curt Horton sitting at ease in a chair, a highball at his side.

Adele was not in the room.

Horton looked up and waved indolently to Falconer.

Falconer took off his hat and coat and tossed them over the bookshelves banking the stairwell. He said to Horton: "Joe Beck has checked out."

Horton shrugged. "What did you expect?"

Falconer was afraid to ask about Adele. He didn't want Horton to tell him that Adele had run off with Beck. "What do you mean—what did I expect?"

Horton took a sip of his drink. "You knew what was going on. That's why you slugged Joe last night. And whatever you said to him tonight on the phone sure got the wind up his tail." Horton chuckled. "So he's checked out—and you're afraid he's not alone."

Falconer suddenly wanted to be alone. "Curt, do you mind if I ask you to—" He stopped; for the tail of his eye had caught movement at the back end of the room in the direction of the staircase leading up to the third floor. He swiftly turned his head—and saw Adele.

Her fine, lovely body was covered by a dressing gown over her nightie. Falconer stared incredulously at her. His relief at seeing her was washed away by sudden anger. Did she undress for all of his friends?

Adele said: "I heard your voice, Roger." She came quickly to him. When she saw him staring at her night dress, she smiled wearily. "Roger, I was in bed. Curt kept ringing the bell till I came down and answered it. Then he insisted on coming in to wait for you. That's all, Roger. I left him here, and went back to bed."

Horton smiled into his highball glass. "Have I, *too*, got you worried, Roger?"

Falconer turned slowly to Horton. "I'm beginning to see you in a new light, Curt. You were quite willing to have me think that Adele had run off with Joe. You're opening my eyes, Curt—to a lot of things."

Adele saw that Falconer had no intention of embracing her. She turned slowly and sat in a deep chair.

"Roger ole boy," said Horton, "I think this is just the night for a lot of eyes to be opened."

Falconer went over to the scotch decanter and poured himself a generous one. His mind was whirring at top speed, with little cogs falling into slots and fitting neatly. He glanced over at Horton to see him grinning at Adele.

Adele's brows were drawn together as though she were struggling with some decision. Finally, she raised her head to Falconer.

"Until last night, Roger, when you ran out after Joe Beck, I—I felt that you never had received *that* letter in Korea."

"What letter, Adele?"

"The one Curt sent you."

Falconer looked puzzled. "He sent many. Which—?"

Adele cried out: "Stop torturing me, Roger! I never in all this world dreamed that you could be so harsh, cold and so viciously vindictive. I never—"

Falconer demanded: "What the hell are you talking about?"

Curt Horton butted in with:

"Roger, I can see that your memory needs jogging. Adele is talking about a letter I sent to you in Korea. I am surprised—and hurt. You see, I felt that that letter of mine was something of a masterpiece—yes, so much so that I kept a copy of it." He smiled first at Falconer and then at Adele. "Roger, it seems that you have chosen to ignore my letter—for reasons best known to yourself."

Falconer was looking at Adele. He saw the color leave her face, and saw her tearing at a hanky wadded in her tight fists. Falconer heard Horton rustle a sheet of paper. Then Horton cleared his throat with sharp significance before starting to read:

"Dear Roger. . . . It pains me to tell you this but it is a duty and an obligation that I do so. Adele and Joe Beck left my party at exactly ten after midnight. They went in Adele's car. They drove straight to Adele's home—your home—and she let them in with her key. I know this to be true because I followed them in my car. Because of my loyalty to you, Roger, I sat in my car all night in front of your house—yours and Adele's. At six thirty in the morning, Joe Beck came out of your house. I slid down in my car seat." Horton stopped reading, raised his eyebrows to Falconer, asking: "Does it come back to you now, Roger?"

Falconer shook his head. He said simply and honestly: "I never re-

ceived that letter." He went over to Adele, stood above her. "Is it true, Adele?"

Adele looked into Roger's face. "It is true what he has written—but—"

Horton interrupted smoothly: "Allow me to finish, Adele." He again cleared his throat. "Joe Beck didn't see me—"

Adele, speaking in a clear voice, finished it for him: "—but I could plainly see the lipstick on Beck's face!"

Amazed, Falconer asked Adele: "Have *you* seen this letter before?"

"Yes. Every word has tortured me for four years. You see, Curt showed it to me before he sent it to you. He told me that he wouldn't send it—if I went to bed with him." Adele stood up, facing her husband. "And if you make me deny that I slept with that scum—I'll kill myself!"

"I'm sure that you didn't. But even if you had, Curt still would have sent the letter. He didn't want me to come back from Korea. He was hoping that this letter would have made me do something suicidal. If I ever had received that letter—I would have blown my top."

Horton clucked reprovingly. "I would like to believe that you never got the letter—but, somehow, horns become you."

Falconer ignored Horton, went on talking to his wife: "I now see that Curt has always resented Dad buying the company from his fa-

ther. Curt is a very devious person."

Horton's snort was derisive. "Speaking of devious people, Adele, do you know where Roger was tonight?"

Adele looked at her husband.

Falconer now saw the whole of the mechanism of the trap that had closed on him. "Curt," he said, "you're dying to tell it."

"I am . . . Listen to this, Adele: this evening I stopped in at a bar where I have an occasional drink. There is a special chick there, and I thought we might have a few drinks together and while away the night. But she wasn't there, Adele. She had left earlier with another man—to go to her apartment." Horton sighed. "Now, Adele, imagine my surprise when the bartender told me the name of the man who had taken this special chick to her apartment. You'd never guess, my dear."

Adele stared at Falconer, her face slowly coming apart.

Horton was enjoying himself. "And the funniest part of the whole thing is this, Adele—the chick in question is quite a girl. She entertains at smokers, and acts in stag movies. She can be had anytime, anywhere by anybody who has fifty bucks in his pocket."

Falconer winced.

Adele uttered a half-strangled cry. She turned and walked slowly from the room, her head bowed.

Falconer watched Adele leave, wanting to call her back but having nothing to say.

Curt Horton took out a cigarette, placed it in his smiling mouth and felt-for matches.

Falconer slipped out his lighter, flicked on the flame, and ignited Horton's cigarette. He watched Horton narrowly.

Horton genially smiled his thanks—and then the smile froze on his face. He was staring at the lighter as if it were a cobra in front of his face. He quickly shook his head to rid his mind of fantasy and jog it back to reality. But the reality was right before his eyes. And when the realization of it finally registered, he stepped back a pace, breathing with difficulty.

Falconer gestured with the lighter, smiled coldly at Horton. "Tell me, Curt—I really saved Joe Beck's life when I phoned him tonight, didn't I? When he told me that you were at his room door, you couldn't kill him—because I knew that you were there. You sure worked hard on building up the triangle business, even to steaming me up enough to punch Joe last night—before witnesses."

No words came from Horton's mouth. He just stood there, gaping at the lighter in Falconer's hand.

"If," said Falconer, "Majel had given me a mickey, I would have had no alibi for the time you planned to kill Joe Beck. I rather imagine that Majel figured to get me out of her apartment some time near morning, dump me somewhere—and then swear I *hadn't*

spent the night there. It's all very easy to figure out now, Curt."

Horton moved closer, seemingly hypnotized by the lighter in Falconer's hand.

"This is *the* lighter," said Falconer, "and you know *where* I found it."

"You went back," said Horton.

"I went back. And I found my lighter which you had taken from the table at lunch yesterday. You planned to leave it with Beck's body. But my phone call spoiled that setup for you. So you turned your viciousness on Majel."

"That lousy tart! I paid her five hundred to mickey you." Horton paused, trying to put his thoughts into some order. "You still will burn for killing her. Vince at the Hog Wallow knows that you left with her."

Falconer nodded agreeably. "That is true. But—and get this, Curt—at ten thirty, while I was still with Majel, Vince phoned her to say that he had come across a pipe lighter at the Hog Wallow, and he wanted to know if it was mine. Majel told Vince that I had left her about ten o'clock. . . . Don't you get it, Curt? Majel was alive and talking to Vince—*after* I had left her apartment."

Horton tossed that around in his skull for a while.

"Curt," Falconer closed his fingers into hard fists, "before I turn you over to the law for killing Majel, I'm going to work you over.

You'll be happy to confess to anything."

Horton casually produced a revolver and aimed it at Falconer's stomach. I am going to use this on Beck, then get rid of it. Thanks for telling me about Vince making that call to Majel. I can persuade Vince to forget all about it. He's always broke and in debt."

Falconer moved swiftly, hoping that he hadn't grown too rusty on those commando tricks that had been drilled into him. Four years had passed since he had even thought about them, and since then his most strenuous exercise had been swinging at golf balls. He did manage to get hold of Horton's gun-arm. The men strained together, and Falconer's wrist proved to be the stronger. Slowly, he forced the gun around till its barrel was pointing toward Horton's mouth.

Horton had one horrible look into the black muzzle as Falconer's hand inched up on his and pressed against his trigger finger.

The gun blast was discreetly muted by the thick carpeting and heavy drapes. Curt Horton, plunged to the floor.

Adele swiftly descended the rear staircase from the third floor. Her nightgown rounded smoothly against her thighs as she ran into the living room. "Oh, Roger—thank God you're all right!" She fell against him, teetering him back on his heels. Her arms clamped desperately around him.

Falconer held her close. He realized right down to the bottom of his being that he had to use his head tonight. He had to think—think faster and more clearly than he had ever had to think before. He spoke quietly to the top of Adele's head.

"Curt killed himself, Adele."

She stiffened in his arms. Her face turned up to his. She said vehemently: "Good! *Good!* I wish he had killed himself four years ago. What I've been through, Roger—not knowing for sure whether or not you got that letter . . ."

Falconer led Adele to the far end of the room and they sat with their backs to Curt Horton. Falconer said: "We had better phone—"

"Wait, Roger. Let me finish. What Curt said in that letter, Roger—it wasn't all true. Joe Beck and I did leave that party early. I did bring him here. Don't ask me what I was thinking, Roger. I don't know, even now. Maybe it was the long loneliness . . . But we stayed here and talked—just talked, Roger. The first thing we knew, it was dawn outside. I told Joe that he would have to leave. Downstairs at the door, he grabbed me and kissed me. I—I did kiss him back. But that is all I did do, Roger. He then left quickly."

"That," said Falconer gently, "explains his transfer from our outfit. Joe fell in love with you, Adele."

Adele bent her head. Her lips moved but no words came. She

shook her head as if to clear it of some insistent thought.

Falconer went on: "In a theater of operations, many things can happen to mail. I'm thankful that I never did get that letter of Curt's."

"And, Roger, I was so sure all these four years that Curt had never sent it. Because you never mentioned it, or even hinted at it. But last night when you ran out after Joe Beck—I was sure that you knew all the while. That's why I locked my door. I was afraid, Roger."

Falconer got to his feet and drew Adele up with him. "Will you please call the police? Use the phone back there in my study. Simply tell them that my business partner committed suicide here."

As Adele walked back toward the study, Falconer turned and approached the body on the floor. Falconer, using only his fingernails, drew the picture of Majel out of his inner pocket. He held it by his fingernails, not permitting his finger tips to touch it, and kneeled beside Horton's body. Falconer pressed both of Horton's thumbs on the front of the photograph.

Falconer once again looked upon the likeness of the lush Majel. And a part of Falconer's mind wondered why Adele had not questioned him about the girl he had been with. Adele's lack of curiosity was not normal. He then heard the mutter of Adele's voice on the phone, and brought himself back to the business of the picture. He

carefully inserted Majel's picture in Horton's inside coat pocket. He just made it back to his feet when Adele reentered the living room, saying:

"They are coming right over."

"Meanwhile," said Falconer, "we both could use a stiff drink. And you'd better put on something over that nightgown."

They were still on their stiff one when the doorbell rang. Falconer said to Adele: "The police. Let me do all the talking." He went downstairs and opened the door.

Two detectives identified themselves. Detective-Sergeant Dent and Detective Wood.

Falconer said, "I'm Roger Falconer," and led the way upstairs. "The man who killed himself is Curtis Horton, my cousin and business partner at Universal Metal Cap."

Detective Wood opened a notebook, took out a ballpoint pen and started writing as he climbed the stairs. Detective-Sergeant Dent carefully studied Falconer's back, his neck, the muscles on the side of his jaw, and his hands.

Adele remained seated, holding her highball glass, when the three men came up into the living room. Falconer said: "Adele, Detective-Sergeant Dent and Detective Wood. Mrs. Falconer."

Sergeant Dent took off his hat.

Wood stopped writing, took off his hat. "Ma'am." He walked over to Adele and asked: "May I have your full name, ma'am?"

Dent unbuttoned his overcoat, pushed back the tails and sat on his heels in front of the body of Curt Horton.

Falconer moved over to Adele and Detective Wood, saying: "Let me have your coat and hat." He placed them over a nearby chair, then gestured toward the divan beside Adele. "Please sit down, Mr. Wood."

Wood smiled his thanks as he sank into the stimulating mist of Adele's perfume. He looked up at Falconer, asking: "And why, Mr. Falconer, did Horton kill himself?" His voice was easy, casual, and disarming enough to draw a glance from Adele.

Falconer knew that he was going to take that disarming charm right out of Detective Wood. He said: "Curt killed himself because—he murdered a girl."

Maybe Adele's nearness and her perfume was a contributing factor, but Wood fumbled his pen and dropped it.

Detective-Sergeant Dent twisted around. "What?"

Adele's eyes flew wide open and stared at her husband.

Dent caught Adele's expression.

Falconer said: "Curt committed suicide because he had murdered the girl he loved."

"What girl?" demanded Sergeant Dent.

"I haven't the remotest idea."

"He must have mentioned a name."

"He did," said Falconer with a straight face," he called her 'Leggy.'"

Detective-Sergeant Dent came to his feet. "The deceased must have said more than that."

"Not much more, Sergeant. But he did say that he smothered her with a pillow." Falconer could see Adele sitting like a stone. He kept his eyes away from her.

"Say!" Detective Wood butted in. "There was that flash, Dent. That Moore girl on Eighty-fifth. Had a funny first name. She was smothered."

Dent tugged at his chin. "Wait up. Let's not go too fast." Then: "Mr. Falconer, did the deceased say why he had killed her?"

"Curt said that this Leggy was two-timing him all over town."

Dent shot a glance at Adele. "Did you hear all this, Mrs. Falconer?"

The question was unexpected. Adele answered: "No, I did not."

"My wife," explained Falconer, "came downstairs when she heard the shot. To begin at the beginning, Sergeant—I was out when Curt Horton arrived here. Mrs. Falconer was in bed. She was alone in the house and didn't want to answer the doorbell. But Curt kept his finger on the bell till she did go down to see who was at the door. Curt insisted on coming in and waiting for me. Mrs. Falconer was annoyed and went back to bed, leaving him down here to wait for me."

Sergeant Dent's head was bent, drawing sharp shadows on his face. He waited in silence for Falconer to continue.

Falconer could see Adele in the perimeter of his vision. She was holding herself rigid. He could sense her apprehension, her controlled fear that he was going to tell the police about Curt's letter involving her with Joe Beck. Falconer spoke slowly.

"When I got here I could see that Curt was worked up about something. I gave him a drink, and finally got the story about Leggy playing the town. Then he drew that gun you see there, and, before I could reach him, shot himself."

Dent nodded his thanks, turned back to Horton's body, and began going through the pockets.

Falconer turned casually, he hoped it was casually, to Adele, and said: "Will you please get some more ice and setups? I'm sure these gentlemen could use a drink."

"Of course." Adele walked toward the rear of the living room to the back stairs leading down into the kitchen.

Some minutes later, Detective-Sergeant Dent whistled softly. Falconer glanced sidewise and saw him holding the picture of Majel. Falconer immediately raised the whiskey decanter to check its contents. He did not look at Dent. Then he heard Dent call quietly to Detective Wood:

"Woody, take a look at this."

Wood went over and crouched down. There was wonder in his voice: "Must be Leggy. Brother! No man in his right mind would kill off *that*—no matter what she did." Then Wood raised his eyes to Falconer. "You can't miss seeing this."

Falconer took as long as he dared in setting the decanter back on the coffee table. Then he turned toward the detectives. He didn't want to see the picture now. He would have to recognize Majel and say that he had been with her tonight.

Wood suddenly whispered: "Duck it, Dent. His wife is coming."

Dent slipped the picture into his pocket. "Show you later."

Falconer's mind had been so intensely concentrated on his own thoughts that he hadn't heard Adele enter the room. He hoped that Dent's "later" wouldn't come tonight. In the morning, he would talk to Vince, the bartender who was always broke and in debt, and tell him to forget about his date with Majel. But, Falconer reasoned, if worse came to worse—Vince could always tell of his phone call to Majel's apartment . . . and that would clear Falconer.

Detective-Sergeant Dent said: "Woody, before you call Homicide, see if you can get the man on that Eighty-fifth Street case. I want him over here to see the—uh—picture."

After that, the Falconer home developed into a merry-go-round of

men—at least, it seemed so to Adele. She was the only woman, sitting there in her fancy slippers, and gown over nightie. She had never had so many men functioning around her. Police officers, police photographers, a doctor from the Medical Examiner's office, Department of Sanitation men, and a man from the District Attorney's office. Every one of them had spared her at least a dozen admiring glances. Men and more men. Then the press. It all had done something to Adele. She didn't know what it was.

Hours later, the house quieted down. The house, but not Adele.

She and Falconer were on the third floor in the cozy sitting room from which branched their bedrooms. Falconer had brought a bottle of whiskey upstairs with them. He said:

"We might as well have a night cap." He poured them.

Adele raised her glass. "To us, darling."

Falconer drank to them. His second sip was to another girl. *I got your killer, Majel. It was the least—and the best—I could do for you.*

Adele looked at him over the brim of her glass. "Roger, I won't ask you about that detective's wolf whistle when he found that picture in Curt's pocket—or what you were doing while you were out tonight. That is all in the past. I just want to know that I will have you always in the future. Can you prove that to me—tonight?"

While Falconer digested that, Adele rose and shrugged out of her dressing gown. She walked into her bedroom, leaving the door open. Falconer's eyes followed her, saw her drape her nightie over the foot of the bed. She grinned back over her shoulder, asking:

"Am I perverted or something—letting all the excitement . . . well, excite me?"

Falconer shook his head, not trusting himself to speak. His jacket had dropped to the floor and his tie had followed it before he realized what he was doing. A little smile traced across his mouth as he pulled off his shirt and dropped it, too, to the floor. One of the several persons which usually make up one person stood aside and clearly told him that he was a two-timing heel and worse. But the same little per-

son tempered his remarks by telling Falconer that what he had done to tie Curt rightfully with the killing of Majel was fitting and proper. As for Curt's death, that wasn't legal justice—but it was self-preservation.

Adele settled herself on the bed, thinking perversely, of Roger and the girl he had been with. And with those thoughts Adele was aware that the heavy sense of guilt she had been carrying for four years was suddenly leaving her. She had never loved Joe Beck in the sense that she loved Roger. She truthfully had *talked* with Joe that long night four years ago—talked part of the time. She had been so lonely, and so full of human nature. And Joe had somehow reminded her of Roger. Joe, too, had been so persuasive.

Like Roger was going to be now.



THURSDAY EVENING, as he had each night that week, Harold Jennings, a mild looking little man, rose from the dinner table and crossed the room to his desk. He stood there a long time, looking down at the ledgers of the Phillips Toy Company, his narrow face frosted with perspiration. For the

"Harold, must you work on the books again tonight?"

His thin shoulders drooped another notch as he turned to look at his wife, Dauphine. He looked at her wide, cow-like face, with body to match, and wanted to scream. Instead, he said quietly, "I'm just about through, dearest."

Life seemed to be starting anew for Harold Jennings. He took a room at a hotel in Rosario, Mexico and waited . . . and waited . . . and waited.

BY RICHARD L. SARGENT

first time in his fifteen years as Chief Bookkeeper, he dreaded opening the books.

He had always been proud of them. As long as the books balanced, R. K. Adams, the firm's General Manager, beamed and nodded his approval and it seemed to Harold that God was in his Heaven and all was right.

Slowly, carefully, he went over the figures.

Abruptly, the room lights went off and the television set went on. Silently he gritted his teeth and watched as she twisted the dials of the one eyed monster. "Dauphine . . ."

She turned, obviously surprised at the edge in his voice.

"How about leaving it off to-night, I've got some important work to do here and I need the light on, and quiet."

She turned back to the set as if dismissing his objection.

He glared at her bulging figure and decided to blast the insipid expression from her face with his disclosure. There was no use kidding himself any longer—the books were off, way off, and there was only one possible explanation.

Dauphine got up and waddled back to the couch. He waited, gloating until she was comfortably settled, then said, "It may interest you to know your hero, Reginald K. Adams, has embezzled twenty thousand dollars."

Her head jerked around toward him. "Twenty thousand dollars?"

"Yes, maybe more."

Her expression was as stunned as his own must have been when he first made the discovery.

"Oh, Harold, you must be wrong," she said as if trying to believe it was a joke.

"No, I am not wrong," he said patting the books, "the whole story is right here, from machinery that's been on inventory but never existed, right down through employees who've been drawing checks, but never worked for the company."

He paused for breath before pounding home his final point. "And what's more, the auditors are coming next week, and I'm going to show them just how he's done

it. Yes, sir, old R. K. is through. They'll throw him in prison—not a doubt in the world about it."

"Mr. Adams is a fine man," Dauphine said as if it were a record—ing, "and I'm sure he'd never do anything dishonest."

"He stole twenty thousand dollars," Harold insisted.

"Now, dear, you've made some silly little error, and before you go making wild accusations you'd better talk to Mr. Adams. I'm sure he'll straighten it all out for you."

"But my books prove . . ."

"Oh, Harold, hush! I want to watch this show."

He groaned. There was no use trying to prove it to Dauphine. She was convinced Adams could do no wrong—and both Adams and she were convinced he could do nothing right.

Adams and he had started at Phillips within a few months of each other, and he'd remained pigeonholed in the bookkeeping department while Adams went straight to the top. Dauphine often held Adams up as an example and wished he would be more like him. At the moment, Harold too wished he was more like Adams because if he were, he'd have twenty thousand dollars and could bid both his wife and Adams good bye.

It took Harold until ten thirty the following morning to work up the courage to approach Adams. Now, standing before the big man's desk, waiting to be noticed,

he wanted to forget all about it.

Adams' brown tweed suit looked new, and knowing R. K., Harold would bet it was tailor made and cost not less than three hundred dollars. During the last year, he admitted he had failed to observe just how far R. K.'s seven hundred dollar a month salary was stretching.

Eventually, the swivel chair squeaked under Adams' two hundred and fifty pounds. He leaned back and gave Harold his usual genial smile. "Yes, Jennings, what is it?"

Harold swallowed twice. Looking at Adams' broad cherubic face, it seemed utterly impossible to accuse him of being a thief. "The books . . . ah, well, they just . . . er, don't seem to balance." Harold chuckled drily.

"Well, now, that is serious, isn't it?" R. K. said as if Harold had mentioned the weather. "I'll get together with you just as soon as I have some time to spare, and we'll straighten it all out."

"With the auditors coming next week, I thought, I mean to say . . ."

R. K. leaned back as if completely relaxed, and ran a hand over his thinning brown hair. "Say, by golly, that's right, the auditors are coming next week, aren't they. Well, don't worry, they'll still be here when I get back, and we'll take care of it."

"Get back?" Harold echoed.

"Why, yes, I'm taking a run down to South America."

"South America? This is the first I've heard about any trip to . . ."

"That's not surprising, Jennings," R. K. said sharply, "I don't consult employees before making a decision. After all, I am in charge here, or had you forgotten?"

"But, R. K. . . ."

"Jennings, have those models gone out to our local distributors yet—the plastic airplanes?"

"Well, no, Marty's working on it. But the books . . ."

"At the moment, I am not interested in the books. I want you to take care of getting those samples out—now get on it."

"I'll see to it right away," Harold said and reluctantly left the office.

He hesitated outside the door, wanting to go back and talk about the books. He heard R. K. dialing, then saying, "Hello, George; R. K. Give me one hundred to win on Balsa Boy in the third at Santa Anita."

He paused at the water cooler. The first sip seemed to wash away his confusion. The cup dropped from his hand. He was suddenly very sure R. K. had hatched the trip to South America on the spur of the moment because he realized his embezzling had caught up with him. He was strongly tempted to go right back in and tell R. K. he knew exactly what was going on. He glanced at the door,

squared his shoulders, and then decided he'd better take care of getting the samples out first.

Still mulling the problem over, he wandered through the large busy office to the shipping room which was located on the north side of the building.

The sight of Marty did little to raise his spirits. The blue jeaned shipping clerk was a tall broomstick of a man who'd been bent by the years. There was a certain rapport between himself and Marty, for Marty, like himself was chained to a nagging wife. The mere thought of the hawkfaced old shrew made Harold wince. If anything, he conceded Marty was even worse off in that respect than he was.

Marty, he observed, was more interested at the moment in the pin up magazine lying in front of him than in packing sample toy airplanes.

"How you coming along?" Harold asked.

"Almost finished," Marty answered sighing over the luscious redhead who was spread over two pages in full color. "Got to be duplicate labels made. They're gonna send letters along with 'em."

There were more empty boxes than full ones. "There's only a hundred of them—how about getting it finished before noon? R. K. says it's important."

He picked up one of the boxes, admiring its clever construction.

Wire eyelets attached to the bottom fit through slots in the lid. When they were bent down, the lid was securely fastened.

"I'll get you the labels," he said putting the box down. He hesitated, tempted to ask Marty what he should do about R. K. Marty wasn't too bright, but they'd been friends a long time, and just maybe . . .

"You know what? These pictures is faked," Marty said with great conviction. "Never was a gal as pretty as this—no, sir. Couldn't be. They got artists workin' them pictures over—that's what does it."

He glanced down at the picture. The girl's lithographed beauty seemed to strike a chord of recognition. He thought back over the years, smiling slowly. "You're wrong, Marty. I knew a girl as beautiful as that once . . ."

"Ah, go on," Marty said chortling.

Harold shook his head sadly. "No, she was real." The reminiscence glowed faintly. "Oh, it was all of sixteen years ago down in a little Mexican town—Rosario. She was young and brown, and full of fire. Lovely, shining black hair. . . ." He felt younger just recalling her. "It was the best two weeks I ever had, Marty. What a girl—warm black eyes, and her lips—soft and red and sweet. Conchita—Conchita Ruiz, that was her name," he said, surprised he'd remembered it after all these years.

"Well, I'll be darned!" Marty said

looking at him with new respect. But then suspicion seemed to creep into his expression. "Now if you had a girl like that, why'd you leave her? Don't make sense."

Harold shrugged as the weight of the intervening years came back down on him. "I'd just finished college and was down there on a vacation. I ran out of money and had to come home."

"But you could've gone back . . ."

"I wish I had. Oh, I thought about it, but I'd started work here then, and . . ." his voice dropped and hardened with regret. "And, 'well, my sister introduced me to Dauphine, and somehow, somehow, I wound up married to her.'"

He was mad at himself for talking about the past. "Hurry up with those samples, will you, Marty? Good Lord, man, here it is after eleven o'clock—you should be finished by now."

"Mr. Jennings . . ."

He turned to the petite blonde who was neatly poured into a green cashmere suit.

"Yes, Eileen?"

"R. K. would like to see you."

He nodded, "Okay, I'm on my way. Oh, by the way, have you made up the labels for these samples yet?"

"Yes, sir, I just this moment put them on your desk."

He went into the manager's office wondering why he couldn't have married a girl as pretty as the

secretary, or at least found whatever it took to make a pass at her.

R. K. looked up at once when he came through the doorway. "Come right in, Harold," he said jovially, "have a chair."

Harold sat down, puzzled. "Yes, sir."

R. K. perched on the corner of the desk and smiled at him. "You know, Harold, I was just thinking to myself, 'You shouldn't be sharp with good old Jennings, he's a darn good man.'"

"You were?"

"Yes, and do you know, I decided to do something about it. It's about time your devotion to Phillips was recognized. Harold, I think its high time your long and loyal years of service were rewarded."

"I really never expected . . ."

R. K. raised a silencing hand. "I was noticing just the other day you're still driving that old blue sedan of yours, and I wondered why you don't buy a new car, but then I realized that on three hundred and ninety a month it would be difficult—isn't that right?"

Harold laughed lightly. "Almost impossible."

"How'd you like a new car, eh?"

"Why, yes, of course, I'd like that very much."

"Well, Harold, you're going to have one. We'll call it a special bonus."

He looked at the face beaming with benevolence and human

warmth and realized R. K. was offering him not a bonus, but a bribe. "You know, R. K., that shortage, I could be wrong . . ."

"Yes, I rather thought you'd come to that conclusion. What do you think a new car will cost—twenty five hundred?"

"Oh, I should say at least three thousand."

"Fine, fine, it's settled then?"

Harold thought rapidly. The doctoring of the books had been so skillfully done that the fact he'd found the shortage at all would be worthy of commendation. With three thousand dollars that Dauphine would know nothing about, he could free himself, if not permanently, at least temporarily. And too, the money was R. K.'s responsibility, not his, so there would be no risk involved. All he would have to do would be to keep quiet until R. K. was on his way to South America. It was too good an opportunity to let it slip by.

"Yes, R. K.," he said, noticing his voice wavered just a little. "I'd be very grateful for a new car. It's really quite generous of the company."

"Well, you deserve it," R. K. said briskly. "Now that that's all arranged, I have a little errand I'd like you to run for me. I plan to buy quite a few lines for the company on this trip, and by using cash, I'll be able to take advantage of the high exchange rate. Besides," he went on rapidly, "you

know how those fellow are—they're always more impressed by cash than bank drafts and letters of credit. Their eyes light up at the sight of good old American greenbacks."

Casually, he reached behind him and picked up a slip of paper. "I want you to go down to the bank and draw out a little money. I've called the bank and it's there waiting to be picked up."

Slightly bewildered, he glanced at the withdrawal slip. "*Fifty thousand dollars!* But, R. K., that's almost all the cash in the company account . . ."

"Yes, I know," R. K. said smiling, "but I plan to buy a lot of merchandise down there. Besides, your three thousand is included. We understand each other, I'm sure."

"Yes, yes, I quite understand . . ."

"And, oh, one other thing," R. K.'s voice was level now, "on the way back, stop by Pickar's Travel Agency and pick up my plane ticket like a good fellow, will you?"

Harold's happy three thousand dollar glow faded to a dirty grey. "Yes, naturally, your plane ticket . . ."

R. K. handed him a small black valise. "For the money."

Harold took the valise and started for the bank. With each step, he felt anger flame brighter before his eyes. "*Fifty thousand dollars!*" he repeated over and over to him-

self. And what was he getting? a dab—not even five percent of R. K.'s total haul. Yet without his help, R. K. would be jailed; it wasn't fair. But if he exposed R. K. now, he would lose the three thousand dollars. He could demand a fairer split, but there was no telling what R. K. would do if he did—he might wind up dead. In fact, it seemed to him there was nothing to do but let R. K. get away with his plans.

He picked up the money at the bank and stopped at the travel agency. Noticing the envelope with R. K.'s ticket inside was unsealed, he paused in a doorway to look at it. It was a one way ticket to Rio de Janiero on a plane leaving at 6:00 p.m. that very night. Any doubts he had about R. K.'s motives disappeared as he sealed the envelope.

Minutes later, he laid the valise on R. K.'s desk and snapped it open. R. K.'s face seemed to brighten at the sight of the money.

"Fifty thousand dollars," Harold said in awe as he looked down at the three small stacks of bills. "That's an awful lot of money."

"Well it takes a lot," R. K. said. "Get me some kind of a box to put it in, will you?"

"A box?"

"Yes—a box. I can't get this valise inside my briefcase."

"Of course, right away."

Remembering the labels for the

samples, he picked them up on his way to the shipping room. "Here's the labels, Marty."

Marty nodded.

He looked around for a box and it occurred to him that one of the boxes that fit the toy airplanes would be about right. "Got a couple of extras, Marty?"

"Sure," Marty answered thumbing through another pin up magazine, "help yourself."

As he picked up one, he saw the plastic models were all packed. A duplicate of the order to the mail room was lying on top of the boxes. It indicated the samples must be in the mail that night. "Very good, Marty," he said, and went back toward's R. K.'s office.

It seemed ironic that boxes of exactly the same size could have such different values—one hundred contained toys worth perhaps half a dollar each, while the other in his hand would soon contain fifty thousand dollars. How funny it would be if R. K. accidentally were to get a sample instead of the money.

He stopped in mid-stride as the thought "Why would it have to be an *accident*" flashed into his mind. The daring of the idea almost frightened him.

As he watched R. K. take the money from the valise and put it into the box, the idea persisted. If he could somehow exchange a box containing a toy plane for the money, *he* not R. K. would live a

life of ease and luxury. The ironic beauty of it pleased him. When the money turned up missing, R. K. would be the one the authorities would look for, not himself.

With the money, he would never again have to go through long, eye-straining hours of work to make sure the books were right to the penny. And once and for all, he could escape the eternal, insufferable Dauphine. Why, with that much money, there was no limit to where he could go, or what he could do. Yes, by God, he could even go back to Rosario and pick up where he left off with Conchita. The two happy weeks he'd spent there could become his unlimited future.

All it would require to make the miracle of miracles come true was a little daring and a little slight of hand, and Harold was determined to try and find both.

R. K. laid a small bundle of bills to one side and closed the box. "Yours."

Harold reached for the money. R. K.'s hand closed over the bundle. "Since you're not used to carrying that much, perhaps I'd better hang onto it for awhile yet."

He put the bills into a thick brown envelope and put it in his inside coat pocket. He picked up the box and cradled it in his hands. "And this—this goes in the safe."

Harold followed him out of the inner office and went back to his

desk. His gaze followed R. K. across the room to the safe. R. K. put the box inside, then twisted the handle as if to make very sure it was locked before going back to his office. R. K., Harold knew, was the only person who had the safe's combination.

As the afternoon lumbered on, Harold found himself unable to concentrate on the books. Again and again he found himself looking at the safe, and the thought of the money pulled him into dreams of what he could do with it. It was so close, and yet there seemed no possible way he could get it.

His musings were shattered as R. K. came out of his office with his briefcase in hand and headed toward the safe. Harold glanced at the clock on the wall above the safe and saw it was four p.m. R. K.'s plane left at six.

His eyes moved down from the clock to the mail scale on top of the safe, then to R. K. who was kneeling before it sorting papers and putting some in the briefcase. Soon the money would follow and his chance would be gone.

His mind spun with ideas that would allow him to switch the money for the sample. None seemed workable. He began to feel resigned to the fact he was not going to be able to accomplish it. He could through, get one more look at the package.

He got up from his desk and went into the shipping room. Mar-

ty was putting the labels on the boxes.

"I'll just weigh this," Harold said picking one up, "so those fools in the mailing room won't put too much postage on it."

Marty nodded without looking up.

Harold walked to the safe and put the box on the scale. Looking over the top of the safe's door, which was between himself and R. K., he saw him take the box from the safe.

He sighed and turned to go back to his desk and collided with the open door which swung into R. K.'s back knocking him forward against the shelves inside the safe.

R. K. let out a yelp, dropped the money and grabbed his head groaning.

Eileen came running forward. "Good heavens, R. K., what happened?"

She helped him up and over to a chair as several other office girls crowded around them.

Idea and action were one as Harold stooped down and laid the sample where the money had fallen. He picked up the money and placed it on the scale, then turned to see if anyone had noticed him make the switch.

Eileen's back was to him, and she was between himself and R. K.

"Jennings—you clumsy jackass!" R. K. moaned.

"Oh, it was just an accident," Eileen said, moving off to one side.

"It's just a little bump."

"I'm sorry, R. K.," Harold said weakly.

R. K. glanced toward the box lying in front of the safe. "Put that in my briefcase."

"Yes, sir," Harold answered and quite calmly put the box containing the plastic model in the briefcase.

"Lock it," R. K. commanded.

Harold snapped the lock.

He walked back to his desk with the box that contained his ticket to enchantment. Reverently, he put it in a drawer and locked it. He had it, now all he had to do was get out of the office with it.

R. K. briefcase in hand, stopped by his desk. "I want you to drive me to the airport," he said softly. "You'll get your bonus when we get there."

"Certainly, R. K."

"We'll leave in a few minutes."

He watched R. K. go back into his office.

His forehead wrinkled in concentration. Since they would leave soon, he could not take the money with him without R. K. noticing. The office would be closed over the weekend, yet waiting until Monday was impossible. Any number of things might happen—R. K. could find it missing . . .

Marty came over to his desk. "Them samples is all labeled, 'cept for the one you've got—here's the labels for it. 'Mail boy said he'd pick 'em up in a few minutes."

"All right, Marty, I'll take care of it."

As Marty ambled back toward the shipping room, Harold had an inspiration. There would only be ninety-nine samples and the note mentioned a hundred. Someone might start asking questions, and the last thing he could chance was drawing any attention to the samples. Besides, it provided a perfect way of getting the money out of the office. He could not send it home though, because Dauphine might open it, and he wasn't going home. He took a label and quickly typed it in duplicate. He would address the package to himself in care of General Delivery at Rosario, Mexico. The mailing clerks, he knew from past experience, would never look at the names or addresses, but simply put the postage on and mail them. He blessed them for their stupidity and inefficiency.

Marty was no where in sight as he entered the shipping room. He laid the package under some of the others and put the duplicate label with the other duplicates on top of the stack. Marty came into the room.

"You've got a hundred there now," Harold told him.

He went back to his desk marvelling at the cleverness with which he'd accomplished it all. It was perfect to the last detail. The switching of the packages at the safe—that had been sheer genius. In that one instant, he had accom-

plished a bigger theft than R. K. had in a year, and it could never be traced to him.

He phoned Dauphine and told her he was driving R. K. to the airport. She was pleased that he was doing a personal favor for the manager, and suggested he do more of that sort of the thing in the future, as maybe then he'd get places.

Everything went beautifully. He took R. K. to the airport and watched him board the plane leaning at the pretty stewardess.

It took him only half an hour to exchange his ancient car and most of the three thousand dollars for a new car.

As he drove down the wide highway toward the Mexican border, he glanced up at the sky and imagined R. K. inside the airliner. He would be sitting there with a benign look on his face, and balancing the briefcase on his portly lap.

Harold laughed. He was in ecstasy. In a few days, he would pick up the package in Rosario, and his happy future existence would commence. No worries, no books, no Dauphine . . .

He flipped on the car radio and hummed along with the music.

The following night, he arrived in Rosario. Vaguely, he recalled where the hotel was that he had stayed at many years ago. As he neared it, he felt he could almost see the neat white building with

its brightly painted window boxes with flowers in full bloom. And inside, were cheerful rooms, immaculately clean, and downy comfortable beds.

He parked the car beside the hotel and strode buoyantly toward the doorway. His steps shortened, and his anticipation died a hesitant death. Even in the darkness, he saw great patches of bareness where the paint had peeled away, and where it had not, street urchin artists had been at work. The flower boxes were still there. Some hung by a single corner, half resting on the ground, and it was obvious they had long ago forgotten they ever held flowers. The door sagged on hinges that seemed to be wondering how long they should wait before letting the door fall.

Gingerly, he opened it and looked into the hallway where a small naked bulb sprayed tired yellow light over a black cat sleeping on the registration desk. He thought of trying to find somewhere else to stay, but he had started out with this hotel in mind, and was too tired to bother. Nudging the cat away, he tapped on the dome shaped bell.

The sound seemed to have touched off a violent argument behind the curtain in back of the desk. It ended when a small yawning man in a tattered bathrobe emerged. He leaned on the desk and regarded Harold with eyes

that were almost closed. His brown face was dark brown and looked like an elongated skull covered with leather. "You wan' a room, senor? Fine rooms . . ."

Harold took a five dollar bill from his wallet and tossed it on the counter. "Dos dios," he said, complimenting himself on recalling the few words of Spanish he knew.

The pinched face regarded the bill with awe. "No change, senor, no change."

"I don't care. Keep the change, I'm tired. I want to sleep."

"Si, senor," the man said enthusiastically. "Come, I show you one fine room."

Moments later, as he took off his coat and shoes, Harold wondered if he could stand the room until Monday when his package would arrive. It was dreary, and looked as if it had not been cleaned in a month. He fell across the bed and felt sleep walking toward him on heavy feet.

"R. K.'s just about checking into a hotel in Rio," he thought and chuckled softly over the great revelation that would sweep the happiness from the wide face when R. K. found the plastic airplane. "And I've got the money, you big boob," he gloated, "I've got the whole fifty thousand dollars!"

Sunday morning, Harold woke with the feeling he had overslept. He looked at his watch and saw it was eleven o'clock. Dauphine had never let him sleep that late.

He sat up and looked around the room, finding it startlingly unfamiliar. He allowed himself to collapse backward on the bed and lay laughing for several minutes. He felt young, happy, and completely free as though he had rolled away the years since he had left Mexico.

After breakfasting at the largest restaurant in town, which was not really large at all, Harold felt even better. His memories of Conchita Ruiz grew as bright as fresh paint on the canvas of his mind.

Overworking his meager Spanish to the breaking point, he finally succeeded in getting directions to where she lived.

He brought the car to a dust swirling stop in the yard of a small swaybacked house on the edge of town. Looking at it, he was about to conclude his information had been wrong, and start back, when a wizened Mexican in blue jeans came around the side of the house. He leaned against the stair railing, watching Harold. "You wan' something, senor? Anything I can do for you, it is yours."

"They told me in town I could find Conchita Ruiz here . . ."

The man's face brightened. "Ah, Conchita, si. . . ."

He turned toward the house and leaning into the call as if to give the words more projection called, "Conchiiiiiiiita!"

A heavy set Mexican woman stomped to the doorway picking at

the teeth in her wide, round face. "You call me, Ramon?"

Ramon gestured toward Harold and talked rapidly in Spanish. Four ragged children ranging from about thirteen down to five years old slowly came out of the doorway and stood staring at Harold.

"Ah, no," Harold protested, "I wish to see your daughter Conchita. Bonita Conchita, que es?"

The woman brushed her hair back from her face with a large dirty hand and cocked her head to one side looking at him as if completely puzzled.

Ramon shrugged. "My wife, senor, is the only Conchita what is here."

Harold regarded her for a moment, and then the realization came. The curves he remembered were still there, but each year had added an extra one in the wrong place.

He started the car. "Mistake—appologizio," he called.

As the car sped down the road, he glanced in the rear view mirror and saw the whole family had moved to the front gate and were watching him leave with cowl-like indifference and bewilderment.

His expression was pained. This wasn't his nice clean little town, and Conchita was not as he remembered her either. This was not the way his new existence was supposed to be at all. Nothing was

going right.

As he neared Rosario, he was obliged to stop as the doors of a church opened and the congregation scattered across the road in all directions. At first, he was annoyed, but then he began to view the people with interest—particularly the girls. Some were small and delicate; some were tall and were very sexy.

As they passed, he noted he drew a few interested glances, and several inviting smiles. The world seemed brighter. All the way back to the hotel, he basked in a self-inflicted roguish glow. He had some interesting thoughts about what he and the high breasted senioritas could do besides spend his money. Things were not as gloomy as they seemed. Conchita had been a disappointment, but there were other girls. And after all, he still had the money, and that was the important thing.

Having nothing else to do, he decided he deserved a taste of life as it would be after the money arrived. He stopped at a bar. He toasted R. K. Adams and the plastic airplane; then Dauphine and the Phillips Toy Company; the health of the senioritas of Rosario; the President of Mexico; Bastille Day; the Fourth of July; and numerous other people and occasions he lost count of.

Sometime during the process, he invited all Rosario to join his cele-

bration, and a good percentage of the population did. The people of Rosario laughed and sang and had a good time, and Harold laughed and sang and had the best time of all.

Late in the evening, Harold declared Columbus deserved a medal for discovering America, and that he, Harold Jennings, deserved two medals for discovering tequila.

Lacking medals, those present awarded him a moth-eaten scrape and a sombrero lifted from the indignant ears of a passing street peddler's donkey.

Sometime Monday afternoon, Harold awoke with seven centavos and a hangover. It was time to take a stroll to the Postoffice and collect his money. He wanted to get it and get out of Rosario. Mexico City—now that was where he should go.

He walked up to the single window inside the ramshackle postoffice. "Mail for Harold Jennings, please."

The gaunt face of the clerk held the obvious effects of a hangover and no expression as he looked through the mail. "Ah, si, senor," he said happily, "una lacarta por Harold Jennings."

He took the envelope. "A package—there should be a package too. Would you look please?"

The clerk grunted and looked again. He came back to the window. "No, senor, no package for

you."

"Are you sure?"

"Si, senor, no package."

Harold felt his stomach turn and he shivered. "It would be about this size," he explained, holding his hands some eight inches apart, "so high; so wide . . ."

The clerk watched his hands with interest. "No, senor, no package. Maybe manana, hey senor? you come back manana."

Harold clamped down on his growing fear. "Yes, manana—packages are always slower, isn't that so?"

"Si, si, sometimes," the clerk answered and went on sorting mail.

Stepping away from the window, Harold opened the envelope and glanced at the opening paragraph of the letter written on the familiar Phillips Toy Company stationery:

Gentlemen:

Under separate cover we are sending you a sample of what we believe will be the best seller in the toy line during the coming months.

He wadded up the paper and envelope and tossed them away. At least the letter had come through. That meant the package must have gone out all right. There was nothing to worry about, the package would surely arrive the next day. He drove away from the post office feeling only slightly disap-

pointed.

He smiled, thinking how much greater R. K.'s disappointment must be. R. K. would have already opened his package. He imagined him looking down in stark terror at the plastic airplane.

The seed of disappointment planted that morning grew on Tuesday. Still he conceded, a two day delay was not so bad; he really had nothing to fear.

By Thursday, he began to be frightened. On Friday, he was terrified. He sold the car.

Every day he went to the post-office half convinced the package would finally be there. Every day, after an argument with the clerk, he left disappointed.

What money he had was soon gone.

One day, almost a month after he had arrived in Rosario, he approached the window at the post office with a sinking feeling. "Ramon . . ."

The clerk gave him an amused smile. "No, senor Jennings, no package for you today. Maybe manana, huh, you come back manana and maybe your package will be here then."

Dreading the hotel manger, he walked listlessly down the street. His reflection in a shop window startled him. His suit, which had always been neat and carefully pressed when he worked at Phillips, had become baggy and stained. His hair was much too

long. He needed a shave.

For the first time, he passionately wished he had never tried to escape his hum drum existence in the United States. Tonight was Friday, and Dauphine always made tuna casserole on Friday night. Every Friday for fifteen years, he'd gagged on it and wished he never had to taste it again, but at the moment, he would have loved some.

He slipped into the hotel and walked quietly toward his room. He thought he might make it, until he heard soft, reluctant footsteps behind him.

"Senor Jennings, una momento . . ."

Harold continued as if he had not heard. The apologetic footsteps followed him to the door of his room. Knowing there was no escape, he faced the manager. "Buenos dias, Senor Fernando . . ."

Fernando shifted from one foot to the other. "Senor, my wife, she say we have to have some money from you now."

Harold tried to smile. "My money hasn't arrived from the States yet—tomorrow, it will surely be here tomorrow. Yes, I'm quite certain it will be here tomorrow, Fernando."

"But senor, you always say manana. My wife, she says you can not stay in this fine room another day without paying us some money."

"Manana," Harold pleaded, "manana I will pay you even double what I owe you."

"Manana, manana—senor, every day comes a manana and still comes no pesos from you. When comes this manana of yours senor?"

Harold gently turned him around and said, "Go tell your wife, tomorrow for sure."

He stepped into his room before Fernando could say anything else or figure out what to do. He sat down on the bed knowing Fernando would stand in the hall a moment, scratch his head, and then go tell his wife the Americano said he would pay the rent manana.

He listened to the familiar sound of Fernando catching hell from his wife.

He looked down at his hands, dangling limply over his knees. He went over the events from beginning to end and found no answer. In fact, he would have felt better if he could only know why the money had not arrived.

The memory of Fernando's voice echoed around him softly. "Manana, manana—every day comes a manana—when comes your manana, senor Jennings?"

"Never, Fernando, never," he admitted quietly. "My manana is never coming."

He looked across the room at his image in the dusty mirror. He could almost picture R. K. sitting

on another bed in a hotel somewhere in Rio, looking as woebe-gone as himself, sitting there with the plastic airplane in his hands, twisting the wings until they broke. R. K.'s manana was never coming either.

He pictured R. K. laughing sadly, and he laughed with him. He was not sure what they were laughing about.

And at that moment, a few hundred miles to the north, in the offices of the bankrupt Phillips Toy Company, Marty stood beside Harold's old desk.

He picked up the brown, dust covered box that had been allowed to sit there through all the confusion following the discovery of the theft. As Eileen passed by, he said to her, "Looks to me like old R. K. wasn't the only thief around here. Imagine, R. K. takes seventy thousand dollars and gets clean away, and Mr. Jennings can't even steal a sample toy."

Idly, he opened the box. He whistled in astonishment.

The lid fell from his fingers and tumbled to the floor. Across the label, in red letters was stamped, "Returned for Insufficient Postage."



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CROUCHED DOWN in one corner of the empty freight car, John shivered violently in his cheap, flimsy summer suit. Cold wind slashed through the half open box-car door and flakes of snow gathering on the floor turned to icy slush. John was hungry, his stomach had been growling all morning. Maybe, he thought, he would have been better off if he had stayed jungled up with the 'boes back in Louisville. At least, he might not have been so hungry.

He lit one of his two remaining cigarettes, hoping it would ease the nervous ache in his empty stomach, and pulled the collar of his jacket tighter around his neck.

It had been warm when they had turned John Kelly loose from the Southern State Prison after a seven and a half year bit, less several months good time. The ten dollars they had given him was just about gone; freight trains and hitchhiking don't offer as good a schedule as first-class traveling, and it cost



BY JOACHIM H. WOOS

DESPERATION

John Kelly drew the revolver and pointed it at the old man behind the counter. The reaction was one that he could never have anticipated and John stood rooted to the floor, speechless, dumbfounded.

him to eat and sleep since leaving the gray-walled city.

Funny thing, his hand discovering the snub-nosed .38 at the rear of the box-car when he crawled into it on the outskirts of Louisville. Although the gun was empty it seemed to be in good working condition and, above all, was not rusted. John wondered who had left it and what it had been used for.

Day was breaking as the freight train slowed to a crawl at the edge of the Michigan Central yards. John eased himself through the door and swung down from the car, hit the ground and moved quickly away to a nearby street—off railroad property. He used part of the measly sixty cents he had left riding a bus uptown. A stack of cakes, coffee, and a sack of roll-your-owns left him with three cents.

Walking down Woodward Avenue to Larnard, John felt miserable and cold, the icy wind blowing off of the Detroit River whipping through his thin state-issues as though they were made out of gauze.

It was late afternoon when John made up his mind that he was going to use the .38 hidden under his jacket. He had walked dozens of blocks and he was getting colder and more miserable by the minute. If he could find a small store, take enough money to carry him over for a few days, and then forget about crime forever.

He started walking back towards the business area. He kept his eyes peeled for the right place.

John Kelly was not a professional thief. The business down South, a filling station burglary, was the first time in his life that he had ever broken the law. Now, at 25, he had no ingrained criminal tendencies and, in fact, he had every intention of going straight, working, and staying out of trouble. But chilled to the bone, desperate with hunger and the desire to get inside where it would be warm for the night, he could find only one solution.

Corktown, along Detroit's Michigan Avenue, is the street of hock shops, penny arcades, cheap bars and beaneries. John traversed the avenue several times, stopping only once to look at a menu stuck in the front window of a greasy spoon. The same sounds and smells as a hundred other skid-rows from coast to coast met him at every step of the way.

Finally, he spotted the sort of place he had been looking for, and his heart beat a little faster. He stopped, walked back and casually looked into the show window of the small hock shop. The window was cluttered with so-called bargains in unredeemed pledges inevitable to the sign of the three balls hanging over the entrance.

John tried to keep his hands from shaking despite the icy wind which was sending shivers up his

spine and rattling the partly closed old weather awning overhead. He could see the pawn broker at the rear counter, and the only customer in the shop had just turned toward the door. It was almost closing time; the street lights were on, and the dismal December sky was rapidly turning from gray to black.

The customer left the shop and moved on down the street without so much as a glance at John standing in front of the window. A moment later, John pulled the zipper all the way down on his jacket, and entered the shop.

He moved quickly toward the old man in the back of the place, who had merely glanced up for a moment, as the tinkling door-bell

heralded John's entrance.

Like an automaton, John walked the few remaining steps, his right hand slowly removing the revolver from beneath his jacket. It was warm inside and already some of the chill of his body was leaving, quickly replaced by a tenseness as if subconsciously his mind rebelled at what was coming.

He stopped at the counter, pulled out the snub-nosed revolver, and pointed it at the old man. Then, before he could say more than "Give me . . ." the old man reached across the counter, plucked the .38 from John's nerveless fingers, looked the gun over with a practiced eye and said:

"I'll let you have six bucks on it!"



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